gameinformer®
THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

FINAL FANTASY XV

LEARNING FROM THE PAST, LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

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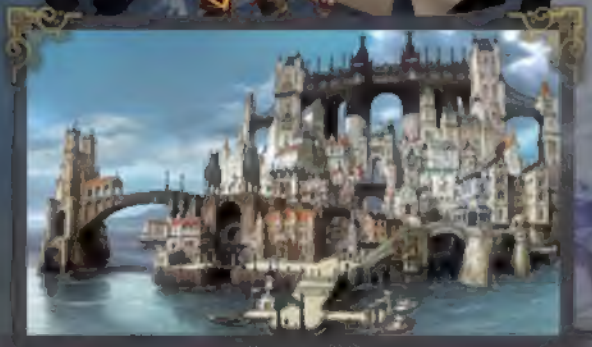

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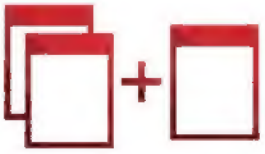

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Don't Call It A Comeback

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

The original Final Fantasy first released in Japan in 1987, but didn't find its way to the Nintendo Entertainment System in North America until 1990. From there, the series helped define role-playing games, with releases like Final Fantasy III (now known as VI) on SNES and Final Fantasy VII on PlayStation. It is in the DNA of every role-playing game you play.

The series is important to not only the history of video games, but to the development of the modern role-playing game. Alongside Origin Systems' groundbreaking Ultima, Final Fantasy helped lay the foundation for an entire genre. There was a time when I thought Square and the series were unstoppable. Sadly, that was not the case.

After the blockbuster release of Final Fantasy VII, it's much more difficult to find universal love for an entry in the series. I loved Final Fantasy X, but that was the last Final Fantasy game I completed. Sure, I played all the entries that followed for a bit, but they simply didn't draw me in like the previous installments.

The fault doesn't lie entirely at Final Fantasy's feet; the role-playing genre changed. The late '90s saw BioWare and other companies across North America join the fray. Games like Baldur's Gate, Icewind Dale, Planetscape: Torment, The Elder Scrolls, and Fallout were incredibly deep experiences happening on PC that changed the way RPGs were played.

Final Fantasy slipped up during this period, but the series was still the defining console RPG, at least until Bethesda introduced The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion. Building on the popularity of Morrowind before it, Oblivion took all the depth of its PC pedigree and combined it into an open-world adventure that became the template for what a modern RPG needs to be. The good news is, Square Enix is listening, learning, and willing to adapt its formula to meet today's expectations.

Final Fantasy is nowhere near death yet, but it needs to reinvent itself and understand the demands of the modern RPG player, and after you read our giant cover story this month, I think you will agree that Final Fantasy is doing everything it can to take back the RPG crown.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

38 Final Fantasy XV

Final Fantasy XV has taken its time with more than a decade in development, but the project is finally coming together. We traveled to Japan to play the game's opening hours, discover new details on how combat, summons, and progression work, and spoke at length with its director, Hajime Tabata, about Square Enix's long-term Final Fantasy project. ***by Joe Juba***

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This year the annual 2016 Game Developer's Conference focused on the looming virtual-reality future. We spent lots of time with the new platform and have a full report.

32 Interview: Dave Hagewood
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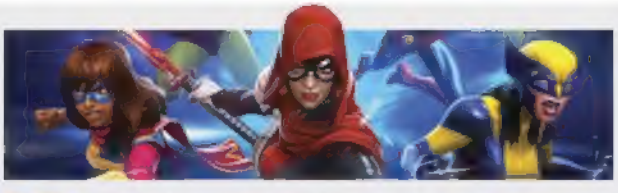

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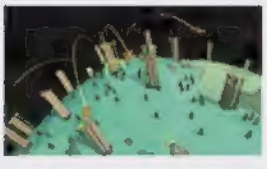
Marvel's female heroes rarely receive the same spotlight as their male counterparts in video games. We spoke with Marvel about how it's working to change that.



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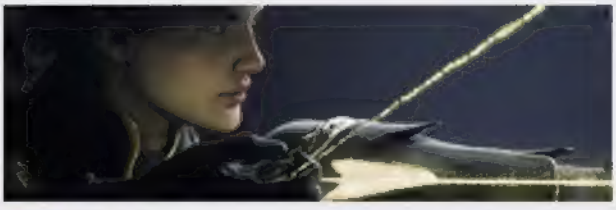

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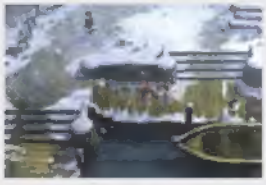

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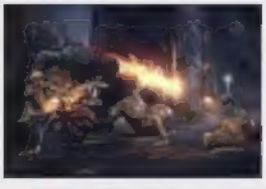

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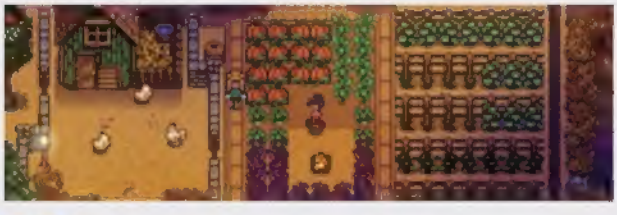

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MONDAY MORNINGS

AND YOUR DRAMATIC QUITTING FANTASY

AND THE DAY YOU FINALLY WALKED AWAY

AND THE TERROR OF OPENING A SMALL BUSINESS

AND THE FIRST QUARTERLY PROFIT YOU REINVESTED

AND LOVING MONDAY MORNINGS BECAUSE YOU'RE FREE

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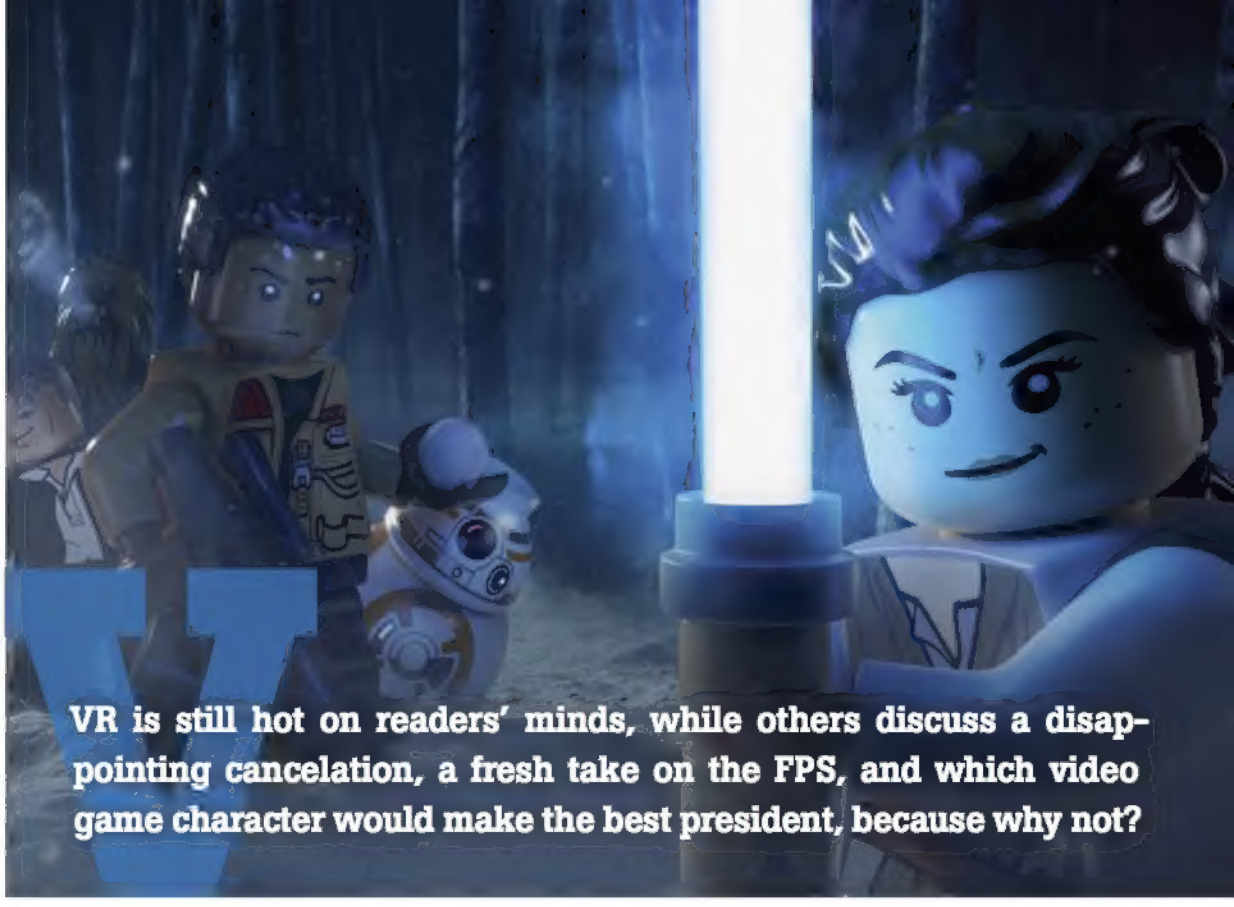


VR is still hot on readers' minds, while others discuss a disappointing cancelation, a fresh take on the FPS, and which video game character would make the best president, because why not?

Virtual Redundancy?

I was just skimming last month's Feedback section when I read the letter from Brandon Lanterman (A Whole New World, issue 275). Like Brandon, I was waiting for the impending VR fad to blow over, but after reading through the VR issue, I'm a believer and I'm actually looking forward to the big rollout. So a big thanks for pulling back the veil on something I think a lot of us may have been a little leery of.

Shane Freeman
via email

Why do you people keep publishing issues that are constantly dealing with VR? It started with issue 273's The Year of VR, and happened again in issue 275. Not all gamers have their own bank account to devote to virtual reality, and it clearly isn't as big as other game consoles. I get that you guys need to tell us about the newest technology, but why do you keep focusing on the ones that are not proven to be good yet? You said it yourself in a recent op-ed, "virtual reality is the future, but the future isn't now."

Will Bochnowicz
via email

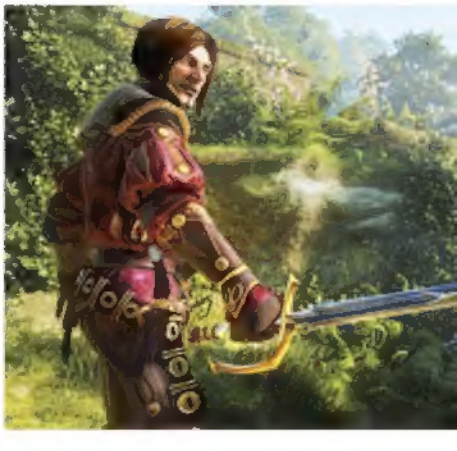
We don't blame disinterested readers if they are rapidly approaching (or have already surpassed) VR overload. However, given the industry's current infatuation with virtual reality, the mixed reception (including among the G.I. staff) makes trying out and dissecting the technology even more important. We'll be reviewing each headset over the next few months to determine if it's worth your time and money; if you've already made up your mind, at least you can laugh at the pictures of us wearing the cumbersome technology.

An Unfinished Fable

I was a beta tester for the now-canceled Fable Legends, and I am a long-time Fable fan. When Fable Legends was announced, it was not the game I wanted, but I can honestly say that it is now. Fable sequels have been criticized ever since the original game, but what upsets me now is that Fable Legends is being judged by people who haven't even played it. I recommend you ask beta testers their opinions of Fable Legends before attempting to form an opinion of it. The truth is, Fable Legends is awesome. It's both RPG and RTS. The game is funny, has a lot of gameplay diversity, and is absolutely gorgeous. Lionhead genuinely listened to the beta community, which is why I have no doubt Legends would've ended up more awesome than it already is. Has Microsoft made the right call in canceling the game?

Melchior Kanyemesha
via email

We don't know enough about Fable Legends' financial outlook to say if canceling the project was the right move, but given the franchise's declining legacy, Microsoft has clearly mishandled Fable as a whole. Ever since Fable III, the series has been a test-bed for different genres (Fable Heroes), technology (Fable: The Journey), and audiences (Fable Legends), giving fans of the core RPG series little reason to stick around. Our hands-on time with Fable Legends did indeed suggest it was shaping up to be an enjoyable game, but given the delays and the switch to a free-to-play monetization scheme in the middle of development, you can't fault players for losing interest. For more on Fable Legends and Lionhead's closure, check out page 31.



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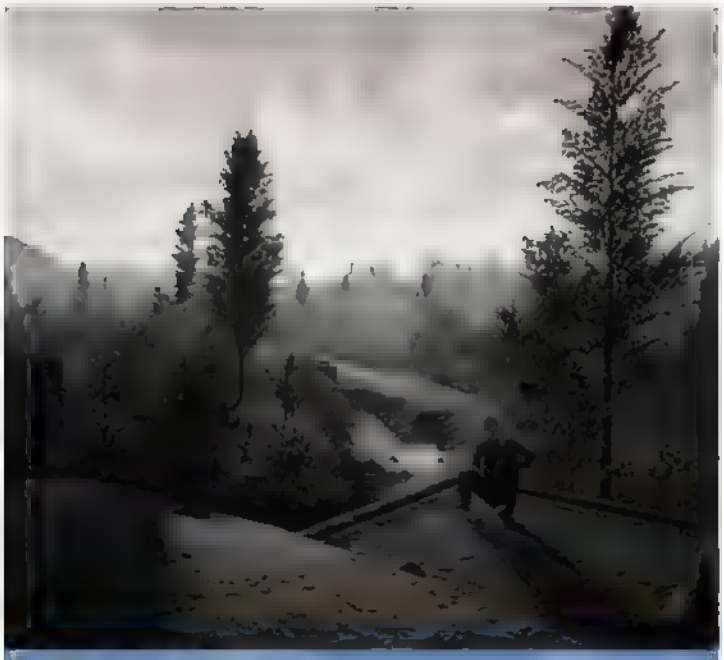


Slow It Down

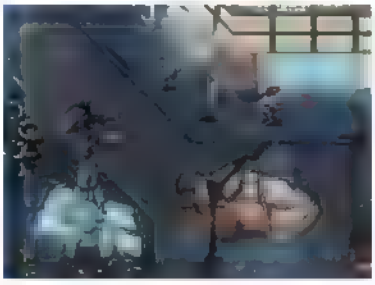
[redacted]

Moving On From JRPGs?

I am a middle-aged gamer who loves the JRPG genre. I played the popular ones, like Final Fantasy, Chrono Trigger, and Dragon Quest. I played the obscure ones, like Wild ARMs, Grandia, Suikoden, and Legend of Dragoon. I love their focus on character growth and stories of saving the world, instead of open-world "make your own adventure" games. I love turn-based and ATB systems that make you think about numbers, strategy, and elements, so your success is based on thought more than action. Lately, however, I feel my beloved genre is dying. I read GI every month, looking for something to fill the gap, and I find fewer and fewer options. Games are shifting to more action-oriented and open-world experiences. I feel the art of telling a profound story is being lost. I love what I had, but I know I have to move on. What genre or specific games should I be looking at to recapture some of these elements I hold so dear?

Daniel Silverman
via email

Don't throw in the towel just yet, Daniel. While the genre isn't as prolific as it once was, there are still some classically minded JRPGs on the horizon, such as Persona 5, Bravely Second, Grand Kingdom, and Cosmic Star Heroine, plus a couple of Dragon Quest remakes heading to the 3DS. If you are willing to try a more modern take on the genre, you might like what you read on Final Fantasy XV – check it out on page 38.



Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Given Microsoft's decision to release Quantum Break on PC, do you think they'll abandon consoles next generation?"

Nope.

"Loot. Who gives a crap?"

Pirates.

"Just what in the world is the Nintendo NX, anyway?"

Great question!

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"This was a good move on my part. That is why I'm acting like a moron today."

Worst Opening Line To A Feedback Letter:

"I know here's not the place to talk about it, but I have no one to complain about this issue."

Question Of The Month:

Which is better: a year of DLC support for a game you already own and love, or a sequel to it?

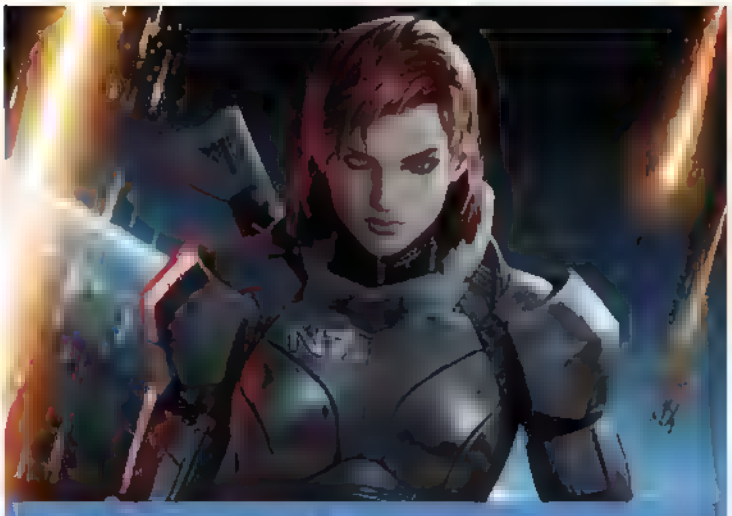
EA APP

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) This month Ben, Joe and Kim traveled to Tokyo to meet the delightful team behind Final Fantasy XV. **(Right)** They also played some Super Mario Kart with FF XV director Hajime Tabata at the 8bit Café. Watch out for those banana peels, Tabata!

On Your Mind

- Virtual Reality Hype/Hate
- Would-be Video Game Presidents
- Broken/Unfinished Game Complaints
- Open-world Adoration
- DLC Costs Too Much!
- Where's The Wii U Coverage?



Mandatory Side Quest

In response to your short quip about the kid trying to get his mom into playing games (Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions, issue 273), I take exception to the advice that he should quit bugging his mom. I'm a gaming mom, and I'd suggest that he start by playing the Wash The Dishes game, and then unlock the Folded Laundry achievement so his mom can get to the console earlier. My son and I play together, but not before his chores and homework are done.

Cate Rowen
via email

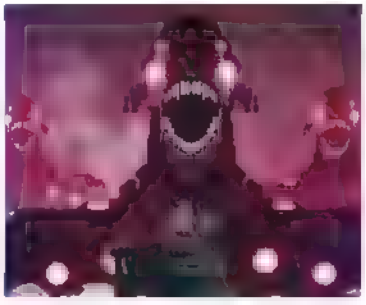
Well, we can't argue with that advice – at least not without getting grounded, anyway. Better do what she says, kids!

Hyped For Hyper Light Drifter

I think that Hyper Light Drifter should have definitely made your cover art last issue. Don't get me wrong, I like Lego games, but I think Hyper Light Drifter is a more detailed game that deserves a bigger space in the magazine. I would personally like to hear more about it, anyway. Plus, Hyper Light Drifter's pixel art is way better looking!

Pam Callahan
via email

That's not really how cover art is decided, Pam, but suffice it to say, we're as excited about the game as you are.



(Left) This month Shea caught up with Phil Spencer to discuss Microsoft's plans for backward – and forward! – compatibility for Xbox. Find out more on page 24
(Right) Insomniac's James Stevenson and Create Advertising's Tom Hamm were looking mighty dapper at this year's D.I.C.E. summit.

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gallery

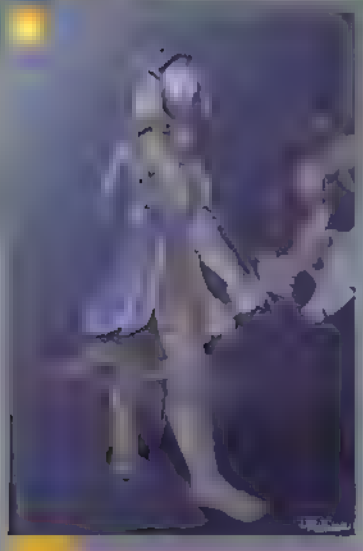
1 Mylene Prudente
This is a couple with many happy years in front of them

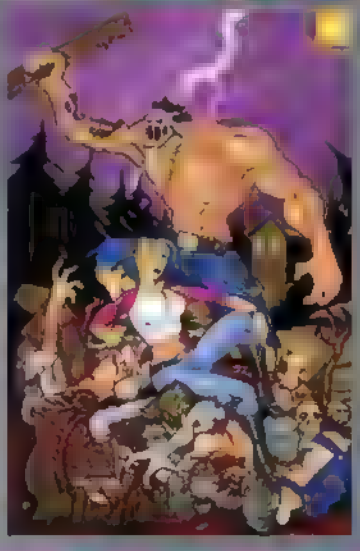
2 Emily Jacobsen
Emily's "Genocide Versus Pacifist" art perfectly encapsulates Undertale's adventure

3 Melissa Chen
At the age of 15, Melissa is already a great artist. She created this art as a birthday present for a family member

4 Christopher Jones
It's hard to look badass when half of your arm is missing

5 Lia Alvarez
The ladies of Final Fantasy X





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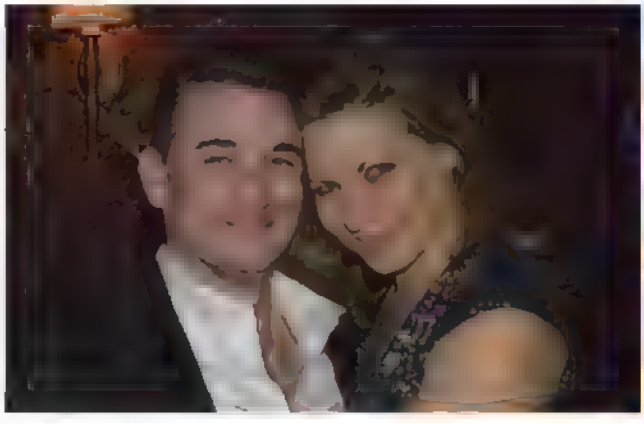
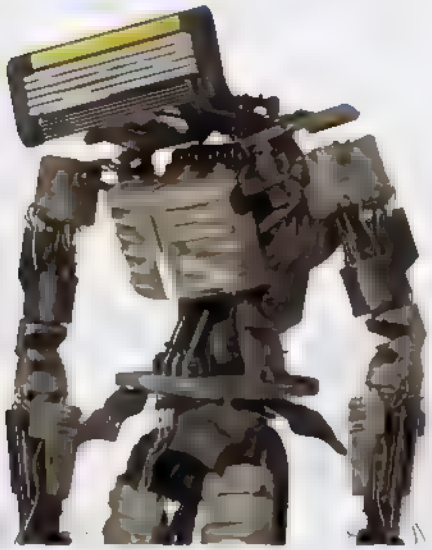
(Left) So were Square Enix's Reilly Brennan and PR guru Tara Bruno **(Right)** We don't know why Kyle decided to do his best Mega Man impression, but he did, so here it is. More like Mega Moron



A SHOWDOWN FOR SKIN SUPREMACY

GEL
THE PROTECTOR
RESERVOIR

★VS★



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other sidekick

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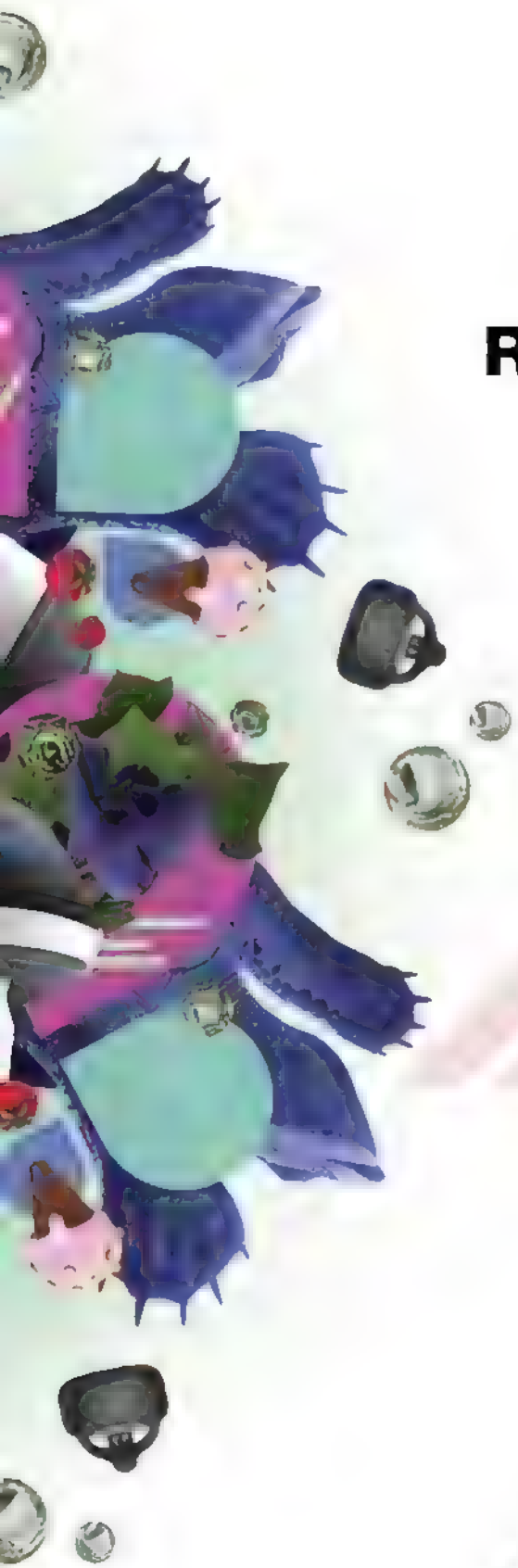
psyonix ceo
dave hagewood



Virtual Reality Races Toward The Starting Line

With the Rift and Vive gearing up for release and PlayStation VR outlining its launch plans, VR headsets were the focus at the Game Developer's Conference

by Matt Bertz

How popular was the Virtual Reality Summit at the 2016 Game Developer's Conference? The yearly event set new records for attendance, attracting 27,000 developers, investors, press, and businesspeople for the five-day affair. Demand proved so heavy for virtual-reality panels that attendees couldn't fit into the rooms on the first day, causing a second-day shakeup where organizers relocated the talks to bigger venues. Read on to find out the latest developments for the Oculus Rift, HTC Vive, and PlayStation VR.

SONY ANNOUNCES PLAYSTATION VR LAUNCH PLANS

The PS4-compatible headset is coming in October

Sony issued a confusing series of announcements about the PlayStation VR during GDC. At an off-site event across the street from the convention, Sony Computer Entertainment president Andrew House revealed the sleek-looking headset is slated to hit retail shelves in October for $399, a price significantly cheaper than its competitors.

Upon further examination of what comes in this box, however, not many can suit up in VR without purchasing additional items. This package does not include the PlayStation camera, a $60 purchase that is required to play any PSVR game. It also lacks the revitalized Move controllers, which some games are using as the primary input device. These are less important, however, as sources tell us Sony is requiring each PSVR game to be compatible with the DualShock 4 controller as well. Sony vice president Adam Boyes suggested to us that the primary input for most launch window games is the DualShock 4.

Three days later, Sony announced a pre-order bundle that includes the headset, camera, and two Move controllers for $500. This price outfits PlayStation 4 owners with everything they need to enjoy the PSVR, and is still cheaper than the $599 and $800 prices for the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive, respectively.

Sony says it plans to have approximately 50 games release for the platform during the launch window, many of which were available to demo at the PSVR event. In a week where we played near-final versions of the Rift and Vive, it was hard not to notice a gap in terms of visual quality and control fidelity between those two and the PSVR. Many of the Move-based demos had poor responsiveness that reminded us of the Wii, failing to register the appropriate movements at the right time. We've had better Move experiences in the past, so this could have been due to interference in the room or young software, but it's something we'll be keeping an eye on.

The PSVR is probably the most impressively designed headset of the bunch, but the hardware limitations inherent to the PS4 and the sketchy performance of the Move controllers during several of the recent demos make us wonder if this will ultimately be a compelling option for those serious about virtual reality. With the October launch still months away, Sony has plenty of time to refine the experience in the lead-up to release, but while the Rift and Vive can continue to throw power at their headsets as hardware gets better on PCs, Sony's stagnant platform may handicap the headset. Perhaps this is why rumors started circulating about a more powerful "PlayStation 4.5" after GDC ended. Sony wouldn't comment on the rumors, but they make sense when viewed through the lens of the virtual-reality arms race.

Star Wars Battlefront Coming Exclusively To PSVR

Shortly after Sony revealed PlayStation VR's price, the company also announced an interesting exclusivity deal with EA and DICE involving Star Wars Battlefront. Though they shared no specific details or release window for the game, landing an exclusive from one of the biggest game publishers is a good move for the nascent platform. First-person shooters haven't translated well to virtual reality thus far, so we wouldn't be surprised to see DICE make a tangential, dedicated VR experience rather than a direct port of the multiplayer-centric game.

LAUNCH LINEUPS TAKE SHAPE

At GDC both the HTC Vive and Oculus Rift shared formidable lists of games coming to their platforms in 2016. Check out how their libraries stack up and who is developing them.

Oculus Rift

- Adr1ft *(Three One Zero)*
- Adventure Time: Magic Man's Head Games *(Cartoon Network Games/ Turbo Button)*
- AirMech Command *(Carbon Games)*
- Albino Lullaby *(Ape Law)*
- Audio Arena *(Skydome Studios)*
- BlazeRush *(Targem Games)*
- Chronos *(Gunfire Games)*
- The Climb *(Crytek)*
- Damaged Core *(High Voltage)*
- Darknet *(E McNeill)*
- Dead & Buried *(Oculus Studios)*
- Dead Secret *(Robot Invader)*
- Defense Grid 2 *(Hidden Path Entertainment)*
- Dragon Front *(High Voltage)*
- Dreadhalls *(White Door Games)*
- Eagle Flight *(Ubisoft)*
- Edge of Nowhere *(Insomniac Games)*
- Elite Dangerous *(Frontier Developments)*
- Esper 2 *(Coatsink)*
- Eve Gunjack *(CCP)*
- Eve Valkyrie *(CCP)*
- Fantastic Contraption *(Northway Games)*
- Fly to Kuma *(Colopl)*
- Herobound *(Gunfire Games)*
- I Expect You To Die *(Schell Games)*
- Job Simulator *(Owlchemy Labs)*
- Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes *(Steel Crate Games)*
- Lucky's Tale *(Playful)*
- Omega Agent *(Fireproof Games)*
- Pinball FX2 VR *(Zen Studios)*
- Project Cars *(Slightly Mad Studios)*
- Radial G *(Tammeka Games)*
- Rock Band VR *(Harmonix)*
- Rooms *(HandMade)*
- Shufflepuck Cantina *(Agharta Studio)*
- Smashing the Battle *(Studio HG)*
- The Vanishing of Ethan Carter *(The Astronauts)*
- Vektron Revenge *(LudoTex)*
- VR Sports Challenge *(Sanzaru)*
- VR Tennis Online *(Colopl)*
- Windlands *(Psytec Games)*

HTC Vive

- #SelfieTennis *(VRUnicorns)*
- Adventure Time: Magic Man's Head Games *(Cartoon Network Games/ Turbo Button)*
- Arizona Sunshine *(Vertigo Games)*
- Audioshield *(Dylan Fitterer)*
- The Brookhaven Experiment *(Phosphor Games)*
- Budget Cuts *(Neat Corporation)*
- Cloudlands: VR Minigolf *(Futuretown.io)*
- Elite Dangerous *(Frontier Developments)*
- Everest VR *(Solfar Studios)*
- Fantastic Contraption *(Northway Games)*
- Final Approach *(Phaserlock)*
- The Gallery *(Cloudhead Games)*
- GiantCop *(Other Ocean)*
- Hover Junkers *(Stress Level Zero)*
- Marble Mountain *(Lightning Rock)*
- Modbox *(Alientrap)*
- Job Simulator *(Owlchemy Labs)*
- John Wick: The Impossible Task *(Lionsgate/ Starbreeze)*
- La Peri *(Innervision VR)*
- The Lab *(Valve)*
- Pool Nation *(Cherrypop Games)*
- The Rose and I *(Penrose Studios)*
- Space Pirate Trainer *(I-Illusions)*
- Raw Data *(Survios)*
- Tilt Brush *(Google)*
- Time Machine *(Minority Media)*
- Thunderbird *(InnervisionVR)*
- Universe Sandbox² *(Giant Army)*
- Unseen Diplomacy *(Triangular Pixels)*
- Vanishing Realms *(Indimo Labs)*
- Virzoom *(Virzoom)*
- Waltz of the Wizard *(Aldin Dynamics)*
- Water Bears *(Schell Games)*
- The Wave *(Wave VR)*

10 VR GAMES FOR GAMERS

Many of the virtual-reality experiences we've seen are more experimental interactive vignettes than fully fleshed-out experiences, but each system does have some impressive titles that should satiate the hardcore. These are the titles the Game Informer staff is most bullish on at this juncture.

(A)

Adr1ft

Developer: Three One Zero
Platform: PSVR, Rift, Vive
Release: March 28 (Rift), TBA (PSVR, Vive)

This first-person experience space tragedy is another traditional game that gets more immersive by making the leap to VR. Read our review on page 85.

(B)

Bullet Train

Developer: Epic Games
Platform: Rift
Release: TBA

Epic Games' first foray into VR leverages the Oculus Touch controls to throw players in the midst of a high-octane shoot-out. Bullet-time mechanics and teleportation give this experience a different vibe than most of the stationary shooters we've played.

(C)

Chronos

Developer: Gunfire Games
Platform: Rift
Release: March 28

This action/adventure game taps into the tropes that fuel countless fantasy gaming experiences like The Legend of Zelda. Players journey into a dangerous labyrinth to save the world from a powerful evil force.

(D)

The Climb

Developer: Crytek
Platform: Rift
Release: April

Climbing up the sides of cliffs is a puzzle in its own right, and this virtual-reality recreation throws in some of the most difficult and dangerous scaling challenges we've ever seen.

(E)

Elite: Dangerous

Developer: Frontier Developments
Platform: Rift, Vive
Release: March 28 (Rift), TBA (Vive)

Frontier's space-combat simulation has gained a steady following on PC and Xbox One already, but sitting in a VR cockpit is the best way to explore the universe.

Ⓕ

Eve: Valkyrie

Developer: CCP
Platform: PSVR, Rift
Release: March 28 (Rift), TBA (PSVR)

This space combat game has consistently been one of the shining VR demos. Featuring both a story campaign and multiplayer, it offers a suite consistent with traditional games.

Ⓖ

Keep Talking And Nobody Explodes

Developer: Steel Crate Games
Platform: PSVR, Rift
Release: March 28 (Rift), TBA (PSVR)

Trapped alone in a room with a ticking time bomb, you must enlist the help of your friends to diffuse it. They have a manual but can't see the bomb, so it's a race against the clock to coordinate your efforts and escape unscathed.

Ⓗ

Project Cars

Developer: Slightly Mad Studios
Platform: Rift
Release: March 28

Racing games are great fits for virtual reality, and Project Cars currently sits in the pole position. This fully featured sim throws you on the track in a who's who of real-world vehicles, from Italian supercars to Le Mans prototypes.

Ⓘ

Rez Infinite

Developer: Enhance Games
Platform: PSVR
Release: 2016

Tetsuya Mizuguchi is bringing back his cult hit in a way few anticipated. Inside the PSVR headset, the pulse-pounding, trance-inducing rail shooter comes alive in a new way with additional content and targeting based on head positioning.

Ⓙ

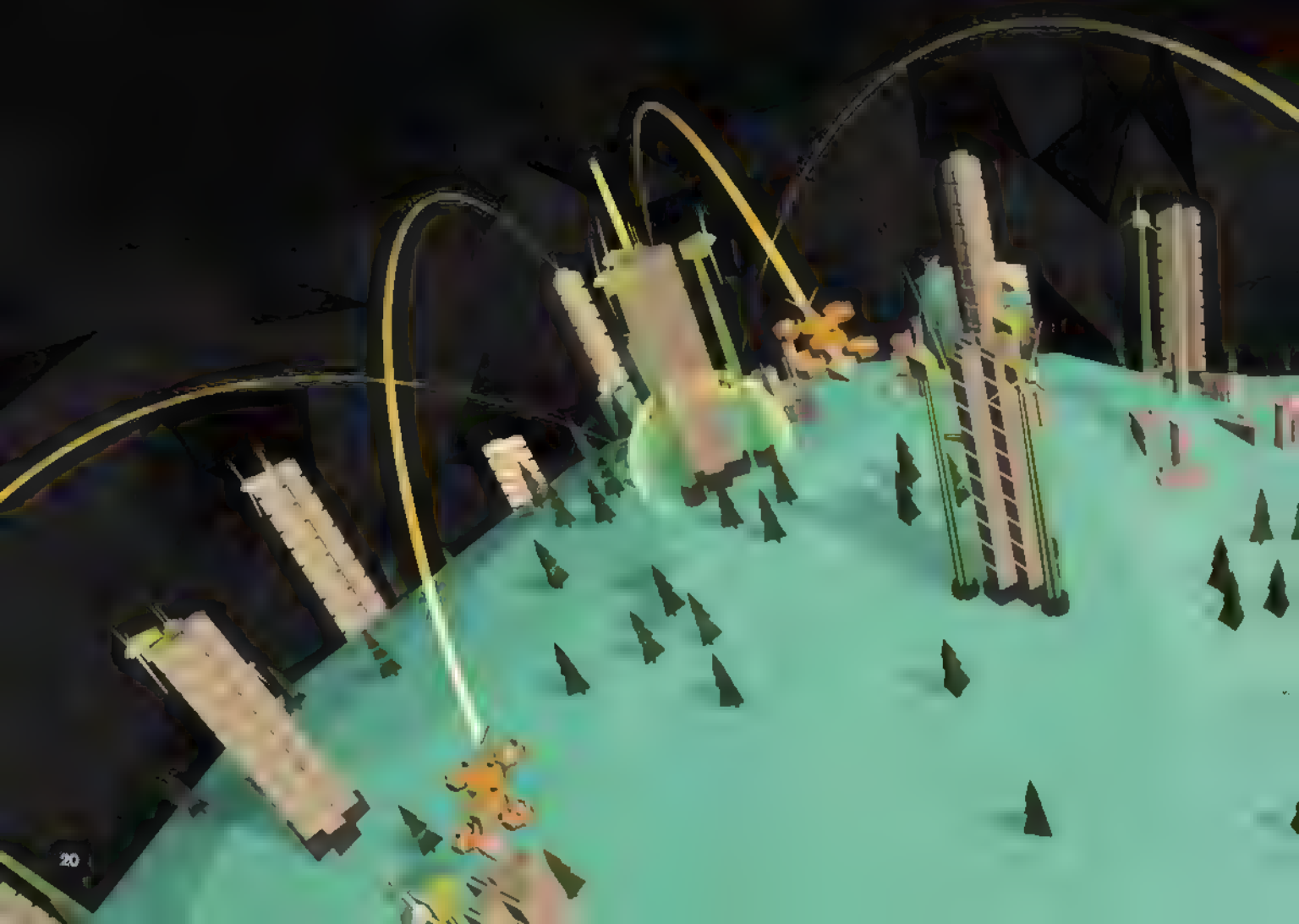
Time Machine

Developer: Minority
Platform: PSVR, Rift, Vive
Release: April (Rift, Vive), 2016 (PSVR)

To stop a powerful virus from wiping out the human race, you must travel back to the Jurassic period to research the dangerous underwater creatures roaming the prehistoric ocean to find a cure. ◆

Hottest Indie Games Of GDC 2016

by Game Informer Staff



For the past several years the Game Developer's Conference has been home to several indie showcases. Games that debuted at past Independent Games Festivals, GDC Play booths, or the Indie Megabooth have turned into must-play hits. However, the "indiepocalypse" is on many game developers' minds this year; the glut of titles on platforms like Steam make it harder for new games to gain visibility and find an audience. We noticed that this year's show featured an unusually large number of games that are already available to the public. Thankfully, a few notable new titles were still in the mix, and these are our favorites.

Beacon

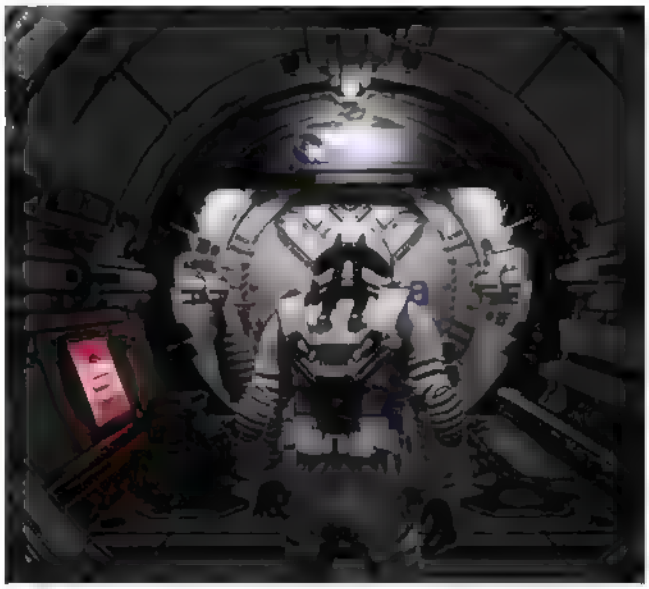
Developer: Monothetic
Platform: Xbox One, PC, Mac
Release: TBA

When your spaceship crash-lands on an alien planet, establishing an emergency distress beacon is your first priority. This is easier said than done when you factor in your limited resources, hostile surroundings, and warring factions. This top-down, action/roguelite's biggest hook is its cloning chamber, which allows you to combine your DNA with that of felled aliens to up your odds of survival.

The Church In The Darkness

Developer: Paranoid Productions
Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC
Release: 2017

This promising indie title puts your infiltration skills to the test against a religious cult that has moved out of the U.S. thanks to government pressure and established a new camp in South America. Given their paranoia about government oversight and intervention, the members of this church are armed, but are they dangerous? You find out over the course of the procedural narrative that the charismatic couple at the center of the cult could have divergent interests that play out in interesting and potentially devastating ways.



Deliver Us To The Moon

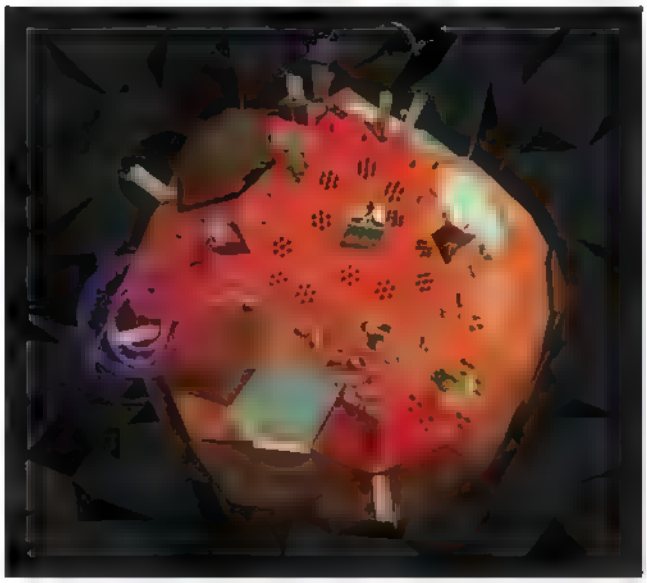
Developer: Keoken Interactive
Platform: Xbox One, PC
Release: August

With the Earth's resources running on empty and the governments bickering instead of finding a sensible solution, one brave astronaut goes rogue on a secret mission to save humanity. Our brief time with this episodic game was spent firing up the rocket's ignition for take-off, then running around a space station to restore the oxygen supply. The atmospheric vibe of the demo has us eager to see how the story develops.

Element

Developer: Flightless
Platform: Xbox One, PC, Mac
Release: 2016

Element was pitched to us as "a real-time strategy space game for people who don't have time to play real-time strategy space games," and it certainly lived up to that claim during our demo. The game has you fighting for various planets' resources with other factions in quick matches where you're building mining facilities and defensive structures. It's fun, fluid, and will be hitting Xbox One soon. PC players can check it out on early access right now.



Elsinore

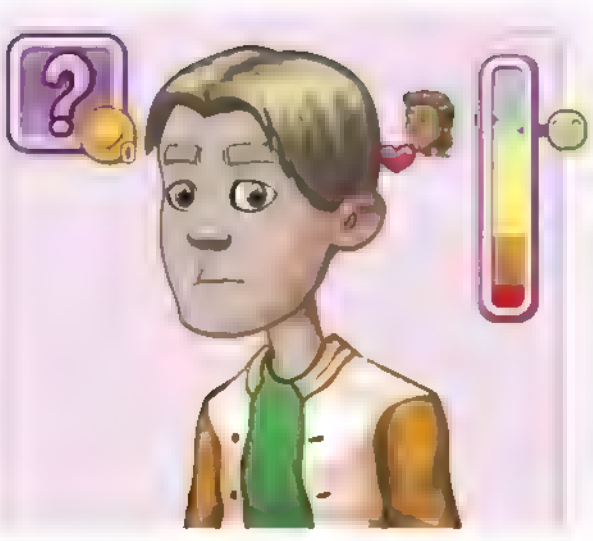
Developer: Golden Glitch Games
Platform: PC, Mac
Release: Fall

Elsinore is a time-loop take on *Hamlet* that casts the player as Ophelia as she runs around trying to prevent the play's tragic events from coming to pass. When she fails, she's forced to relive the same four days over and over again. Ophelia is unable to forcibly prevent Hamlet or Claudius from doing what they're going to do; instead, she provides the characters with information that might change the course of events – but not always for the better. From what we've seen of Elsinore so far, it appears to be living up to its sizeable and twisted ambitions.

Frozen Synapse 2

Developer: Mode 7 Games
Platform: PC, Mac
Release: 2016

The original Frozen Synapse won over strategy fans with its addictive, double-blind, turn-based action. The sequel ups the ante with an ambitious plan to graft on a procedurally generated open world, multiple factions, diplomacy, and a variety of objectives. If Frozen Synapse 2 successfully ties these elements together, it could offer a depth of experience to rival that of heralded strategy titles like Civilization and Alpha Centauri.



Kitty Powers' Love Life

Developer: Magic Notion
Platform: PC, iOS
Release: 2017

When Magic Notion first released Kitty Powers' Matchmaker on iOS, the game failed to make a dent in the nearly impenetrable App Store marketplace. But after porting the clever dating sim to PC, it became a streaming favorite and finally found its audience. The sequel has the addictive matchmaking of the original, but with a world-building element that reminds us of The Sims, challenging the player to offer guidance and put couples in environments that nurture their relationships. As more couples move to the town and the citizenry diversifies, the potential for affairs and intrigue expands

Streets Of Rogue

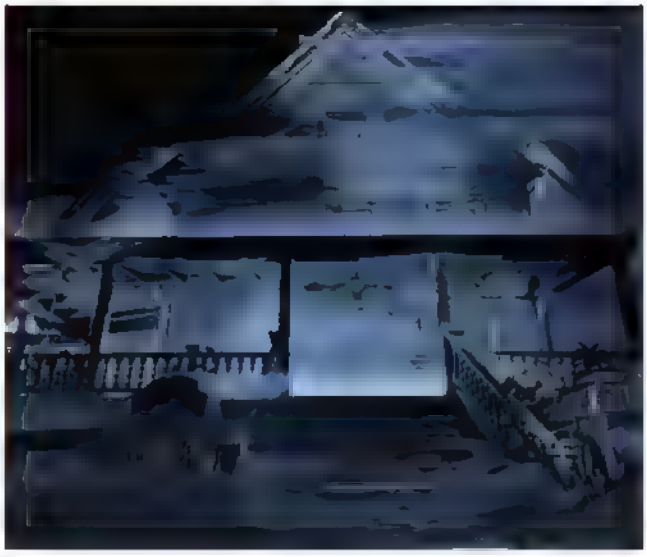
Developer: Matt Dabrowski
Platform: PC, Consoles TBA
Release: TBA

Streets of Rogue is a fascinating mess, in the best way possible. A mishmash of genres, this rogue-lite requires you to complete objectives in a procedurally generated city. How you go about doing that is up to you. In classic Deus Ex fashion, you could charm your way past folks, kill them, hack computers, or sneak around. We're curious to see how Streets of Rogue comes together, but for now it looks very promising.

Perception

Developer: Deep End Games
Platform: Xbox One, PC
Release: TBA

Perception is being made by former Irrational Games designer/director Bill Gardner, and that pedigree shines through with its strong sense of place and atmosphere. Players assume the role of a blind woman navigating a spooky house, and the stellar sound design and engaging setting are already showing through at this early stage. From our slice of gameplay, Perception could end up being one of those rare horror games that can be unsettling and memorable without relying on cheap jump scares.



Tear Through

Developer: Bandit-1
Platform: PC, Mac
Release: TBA

Tear Through is an isometric tactical-action game inspired by the SWAT series that features icons instead of people. You play as a SWAT officer completing various objectives in different levels, like rescuing hostages or defusing bombs. The array of tactics available, such as peeking under the door to survey the surroundings or shooting through walls to take out foes, makes Tear Through much deeper than it appears. You can even take non-lethal approaches thanks to a selection of gadgets and traps that help you detain suspects. You can tackle the various scenarios alone or with up to three other players.

Xbox Goes Universal

What Microsoft's melding of Xbox One and Windows 10 means for gamers

Microsoft's Xbox One has always been based on the Windows operating system, but through further integration with Windows 10, the company hopes to unlock new capabilities for its current and future consoles. During the Xbox Spring Showcase in February, Microsoft expanded its plans for the Universal Windows Platform, which enables features like backward and forward compatibility and further expansions to cross-platform play.

For consoles, this means games no longer need to be tied to the hardware they're originally released for. For example, a game that releases for Xbox One could theoretically be played on whatever hardware Microsoft releases next without the architectural struggle seen with enabling Xbox 360 games to work on Xbox One. "We can effectively feel a little bit more like what we see in PC, where I can still go back and run my old Doom games and Quake games so many years ago, but I can still see the best 4K games come out and my library is always with me," Spencer said in his address.

With that advantage in tow, Spencer says this could lead the way for faster hardware innovation in the console space. While that doesn't mean players will be taking apart their systems and upgrading components like a gaming PC, Spencer thinks it may lead to shorter console cycles, instead of waiting seven years for another piece of hardware to launch. Additionally, when players do buy a new system, they won't need to start from scratch with an all-new library of games.

"When I'm building something today, I know that it will be playable 10 years from now because I'm building on a platform that a company like Microsoft is out there supporting," Spencer tells us.

Cross-platform development may also be a boon for the Xbox library. Because of the breadth of Windows-based platforms, Spencer says that when you factor in indie, triple-A, and first-party titles, more games are in development for Xbox than ever before.

Having an app framework that spans various pieces of hardware also eases the process for enabling things like cross-platform play. Microsoft has announced Xbox One now natively supports cross-platform play with Windows 10, with Psyonix's Rocket League being the first to support the feature. Microsoft didn't stop there, even offering the possibility for cross-network play between the Xbox One and competing consoles – if the developers and other network owners are willing to cooperate, of course.

In response to the idea of cross-network play between Xbox and PlayStation, Sony's vice president of publisher and developer relations, Adam Boyes, tells us the decision will ultimately come down to the content owner. "We're always open to stuff like that," he says. "It's all about what the developers and publishers want to do. They get in touch with us and handle everything on a case-by-case basis."

Despite that optimistic view, Boyes says a few technical hurdles remain. "I think we have to analyze what the impact is going to be and how the handoff works," he says. "Our publishers know their business very well, so we always want to look at those opportunities."

Though Microsoft has grand plans for Xbox One, Windows 10, and the Universal Windows Platform, many of the ideas haven't yet been fully elaborated on, and Microsoft hasn't detailed when and how it hopes to accomplish these feats. Microsoft has tried and failed to integrate Xbox and PC gaming in the past through its Games for Windows Live initiative in 2007, and with Xbox applications becoming more universal, it could very well remove the exclusivity of several of its titles as we saw with Quantum Break.

It's entirely possible that the pros will outweigh the cons, but it's important to approach announcements such as these with a healthy dose of skepticism. If Microsoft can deliver on the promises of the Universal Windows Platform, however, this initiative could be the start of an exciting new direction for the Xbox brand. \

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AARON BLEYAERT: CONAN O'BRIEN'S OTHER SIDEKICK

Conan O'Brien is a well-known writer and comedian, and the late-night host of the appropriately titled *Conan* TV show. He's a Harvard graduate with a fantastic track record of consistently delivering comedy on television. In the world of video games, however, he is a clueless idiot whose exploits in the field of interactive entertainment barely qualify as trying his best. We've seen this first hand in his show's widely popular and hilarious Clueless Gamer segments. Aaron Bleyaert is the man who boldly and fruitlessly tries to guide Conan O'Brien through this unknown world, explaining why Super Smash Bros. is exciting, what Minecraft is, and what the B button does, all for our entertainment. ***by Kyle Hilliard***

"It's weird I am in this position, because I have always loved video games and grew up with them, obviously, but Clueless Gamer all came about in a weird-funny way," Bleyaert says. The idea stemmed from Bleyaert trying to find something he knew a lot about, but Conan would know very little about, and see if some comedy could be culled from his lack of expertise. "Now it's become this thing where I've become a video game guy, which I love and is fantastic. It's extremely weird, because I never defined myself as that."

Bleyaert began working for *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* in 2001, starting as an intern and working his way up to his current position as a senior digital producer who is also heavily involved in the social media side of the show. He's always been a fan of video games, but every segment still requires substantial research in order to make sure he has as much information as possible to play the straight man to Conan. Bleyaert will study the games planned for segments for weeks prior to shooting. "I don't want to let the audience down, and I want the game to be portrayed well," Bleyaert says, which is also important since some of the segments are paid for by the game being featured. "The less Conan knows about the game and the more I can tell him, the more he can react to it. It's one of those things in a joke where the setup is equally as important as the punchline."

Bleyaert can't help but emphasize how truly bad Conan is at playing games. "Every developer that comes in is like, 'Oh, he's so bad,' and I'm like, 'Just wait,'" Bleyaert says. "It's like, 'Go left. Go left. Go left. No, your other left. The other left. No, hit B, B, B. The red one! This one!' and then I'll hit it. And that's for every movement in a game." Despite the comedic frustration, Bleyaert says the reason the segment works so well is because of trust, which is also necessary of the publishers and developers who put their games in front of Conan to be played in the opposite way they're intended. "Everybody is like, 'Oh my god! He punches you!' That's a good thing," Bleyaert says. "He comes from a lot of brothers and Conan says, 'I beat you up, because I can't hit my brothers.' It's a show of affection."

As Conan's video game expert, Bleyaert has incidentally started to craft a group of fans tangential to Conan's. For a recent segment that involved taking Conan to Korea, Bleyaert found himself in the middle of an excited mob of fans on the other side of the world. He was part of the trip to perform his normal producer duties, but the fans waiting to greet Conan at the airport displayed the same appreciation for Bleyaert. "Conan gets in the car and leaves, and everyone is like, 'Wait. Aaron is still here!'" Bleyaert says. "They all kind of mobbed me because they love video games there, and I was a big celebrity in Korea and I am just by myself, which was a little scary, but very cool."

For his own appreciation of games, Bleyaert has the tastes of someone who has been playing for years. "There are two things I love: new concepts I haven't seen, and I love great storytelling in games," Bleyaert says, sharing his appreciation for Fallout, as well as indie games like Braid and the recent Superhot.

For the show though, comedy comes first. "We are a comedy show and I am not interested in how many pixels, the angle of parallax – whatever. I am just making up words now," Bleyaert says. "Clueless Gamer's a weird balance, because there are not a lot of huge regular platforms on television where people are talking about video games. We're trying to kind of please the masses as well as sort of please myself, and find what Conan would be good at."

STREET FIGHTER V

Street Fighter V garnered acclaim for its gameplay, but many felt it was lacking in offline content. We asked executive producer Yoshinori Ono about the mindset leading up to launch and the team's post-launch plans. *by Brian Shea*

With the game now available to the public, what has the feedback from players looked like from your perspective?
I'm actually pleased that nearly all the players I've come in contact with are having a lot of fun with the battle engine and core gameplay mechanics. The unique personalities of the 16 launch characters and the variety of fighting styles amongst these characters has also been extremely well received. When we set out to make Street Fighter V, our goal was to hit the reset button and create a new Street Fighter experience that would level the playing field, and at the same time, appeal to both our longtime fans as well as newcomers. Building on the foundation we have laid out, we haven't forgotten about the single-player content. I think the story expansion coming in June and content from other updates will deliver the more robust single-player experience our fans have been asking for.

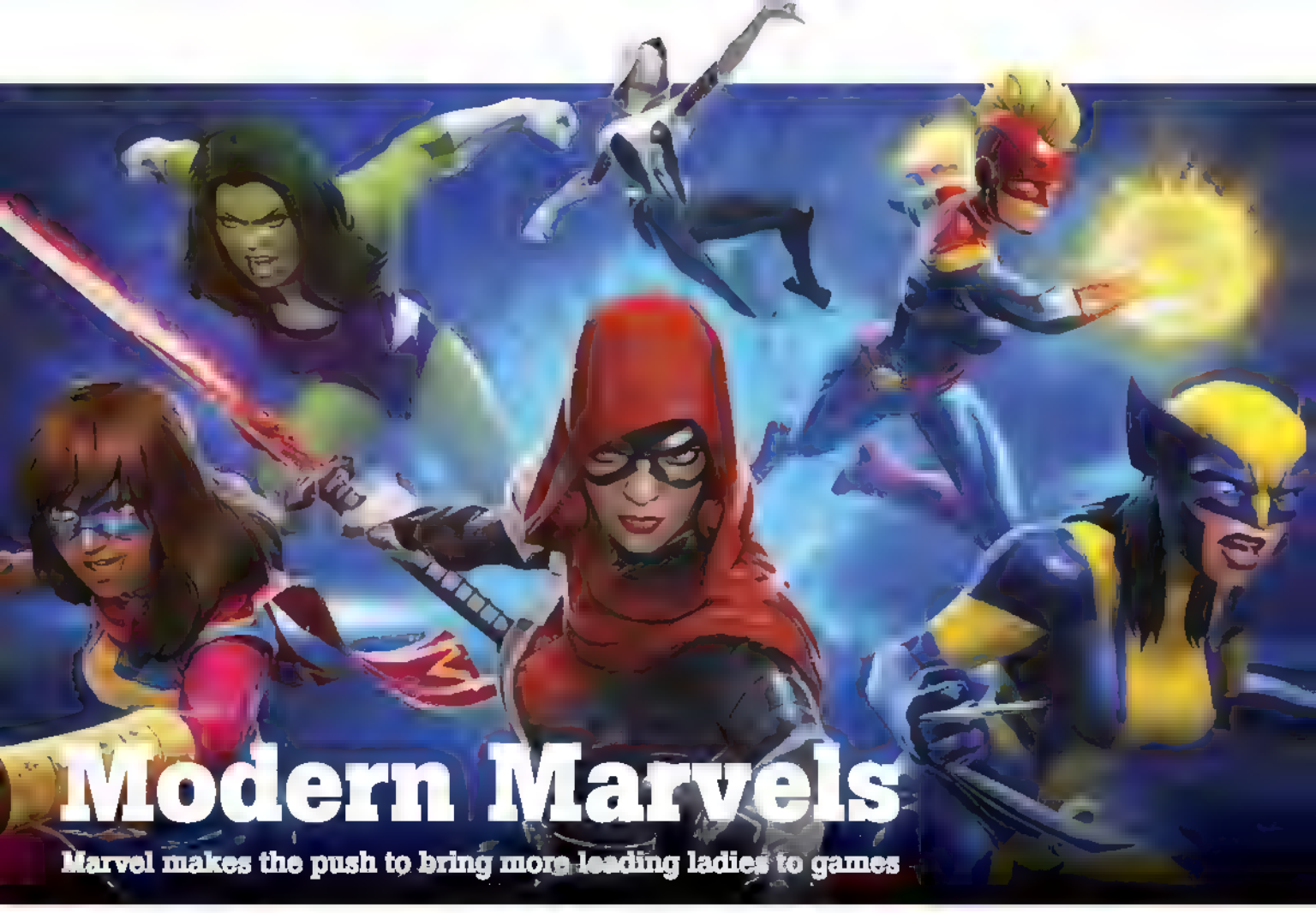
Were there concerns prior to launch that there weren't many modes for players unless they wanted to play online? Did you think players would miss arcade mode?
I think it's safe to say that we underestimated the popularity of some of the single-player features, and in particular, arcade mode. That said, we are excited about the two all-new single-player modes – character story and survival – and we have plans to continue to refine and expand onto those experiences. Additionally, we're looking into adding a versus CPU mode and more new unannounced gameplay content for offline players that will be made available for free throughout 2016 and beyond.

What was the goal in adding so many popular features after launch? With the first content update with challenges and lobbies coming just one month after launch, did the team ever consider delaying the game until those modes were ready?
We were so excited to get the game in the hands of our fans, and we did our best to include as much content as we could for the February launch, but obviously some players expected more. For those fans, all we can say is that we're working hard to address the concerns that have been voiced, and we have huge plans in place for regular game updates that will contain enhancements and new content additions. As we've stated in the past, Street Fighter V is an evolving platform that will continue to get more refined and built upon over time. For us, this is a marathon and not a sprint, and we appreciate all of the words of support as we embark on this journey together. We've almost hit eight years of Street Fighter IV, and we expect to work on Street Fighter V for just as long, if not longer!

Did the start of the Capcom Pro Tour season play a part in launching the game before certain features were ready?
The Capcom Pro Tour wasn't the only reason for why the game was released when it was. We understand that if we had more features ready at launch, it probably would've been better received by some of our more casual fans who tend to enjoy Street Fighter more via single-player content, as opposed to competitive online play.

There's a delicate balance between our hardcore and casual players. We understand that the game serves several needs and we'll continue to work hard to strike that perfect balance so that we can live up to our "Street Fighter for all" mission.

In addition to what we already know is coming, what features or modes would you like to see added? What have been the most requested additions?
We are listening very closely to what the fans are requesting and are discussing internally what features and improvements to make moving forward. In addition to addressing the concerns we're hearing regarding the single-player content, one thing we have heard constantly from our fans is that they would like to see us improve the online experience. We are putting in a lot of effort to smooth out the server problems and address issues such as rage quitters, which is affecting players' online experience. Once we are able to implement all the fixes we have in store, I'm confident fans will enjoy the online experience that much more.



Modern Marvels

Marvel makes the push to bring more leading ladies to games

This past March, Marvel celebrated its "Women of Power," devoting the month to putting female heroes and villains center stage. Marvel Publishing released 25 comic covers with its leading ladies and launched new products featuring popular characters like Black Widow and Spider-Gwen. The promotional push also included updates to seven of its current video games. For instance, Lego Marvel's Avengers released new downloadable content to include Captain Marvel, Moonstone, and Poundcakes, while mobile title, Marvel Contest of Champions, offered a new event quest featuring the latest Ms. Marvel.

by Kimberley Wallace

Marvel says this is only the beginning of its plans for video games. We chatted with Marvel Games creative director Bill Rosemann and director of content and character development Sana Amanat about what the future holds.

Marvel's comic-book fans have seen a number of reimagined heroes in recent years, putting new leads in the shoes of iconic characters. We have Kamala Khan (Marvel's first Muslim character) as Ms. Marvel. The previous Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers, is now Captain Marvel. Wolverine's protégé, X-23, has taken over for him, and Jane Foster has assumed the role of Thor. Marvel is confident with these new leads and hopes they also secure a place in its video game adaptations.

In the last year, the Marvel Games team has reformed, and one of its biggest goals is to always be in sync with what other Marvel departments are doing across all media. "We've been looking at the characters being developed in publishing, animation, TV, and film, specifically characters such as Ms Marvel, Captain Marvel, Jane Foster, Spider-Gwen, X-23, and also our longstanding popular characters, such as Elektra, Black Widow, Storm, and She-Hulk," Rosemann says. "We're specifically putting an emphasis on bringing these new characters to all of our games."

This transition has already started. Rosemann cites Captain Marvel appearing in seven of its games along with Ms. Marvel, and Spider-Gwen already making appearances in a handful. "Whether you want to play a match-three game, a Lego game, a fighting game, or whatever type of game you want to play, you're going to see these new cool female characters," Rosemann says. "When we bring these characters into the games, we want to be 100-percent authentic, that the way they appear in the game is very true to who they are."

Marvel is continuing to reinvent its characters and updating them to reflect modern times, even giving them new issues to tackle, such as cancer and pregnancy. "For us, we're at a point where we're realizing people are connecting with these characters in a way that they never have before," Amanat says. Time will tell how these connections will fare in video games, but Rosemann and Amanat seem optimistic in what these new heroes can offer games.

"I would love to play a Ms. Marvel game," Amanat says, who helped create her. "I think she's such an adorable, fun-loving character. Her world is also so unique, so much about game playing is the environment and the setting. I'm obviously very, very biased here."

Rosemann would like to see an A-Force game where you build your team based on the mission type. "If it's an espionage mission, maybe you'd have Black Window or Mockingbird on that team, or if you want to slug it out with monster Marvels, I'd pick heavy-hitters like She-Hulk and the new Thor," he says.

These are just hopes at the moment, but it does showcase some of the potential for these female heroes and what their worlds can offer. Who knows? Maybe Marvel will take a chance on one for her own video game. For now, it's nice to see a push to make sure they're included in upcoming game projects.

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GameStop POWERUP REWARDS

Final Fantasy Villains

Kefka

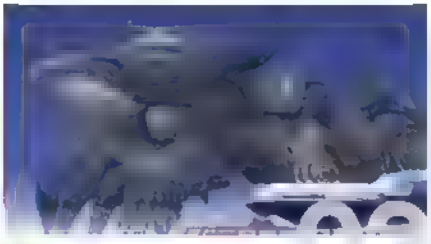
Final Fantasy VI

This monstrous villain from Final Fantasy VI is memorable not only for his cruelty and deadly streak of nihilism, but also for bringing about the end of the freaking world. In a series filled with colorful villains, none of them come close to dethroning this demented clown.

Sephiroth

Final Fantasy VII

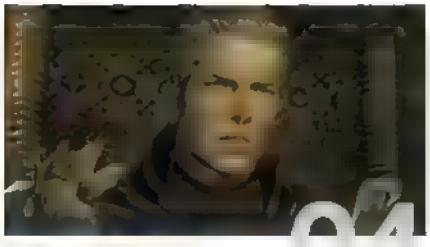
Okay, yes, Sephiroth tries a bit too hard to impress everyone with his aloofness. However, his origin as a genetic experiment makes him a sympathetic villain – even if he does kill one of Final Fantasy's most beloved characters. Also, his katana is badass.



Sin

Final Fantasy X

An entire world lives in constant fear of Sin, and it's not hard to see why; the beast is essentially an indestructible and deadly flying whale. That terrifying outer shell is bad enough, but seeing what lies at Sin's heart adds a new layer to this foe.



Judge Gabranth

Final Fantasy XII

Gabranth is torn between his sense of duty and his morality, which makes him one of the most compelling characters in Final Fantasy XII. His relationship with his brother, Basch, is also a captivating story – and one that ends beautifully.

Caius

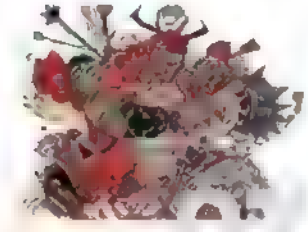
Final Fantasy XIII-2

As Lightning's purple-eyed rival, Caius is a time-hopping foe who stops at nothing to achieve his goal: bringing about the apocalypse. However, when you learn why he wants to end existence, your inability to defeat him seems a little less tragic.

Golbez

Final Fantasy IV

Golbez is a contradiction: equal parts monstrous terror and sympathetic human. It's eventually revealed that he's been under the control of FF IV's true villain, Zemus, and his transformation into someone seeking to atone for his sins makes him a riveting character.



Gilgamesh

Final Fantasy V

Gilgamesh is a fan favorite, appearing several times throughout the series. The best version has to be the comedic one in FF V, who not only has amusing dialogue but is eventually willing to sacrifice himself for the good of the party after having a change of heart.

Ultros

Final Fantasy VI

Ew. Just look at him. Like Gilgamesh, Ultros is a recurring boss who also functions as comedic relief and is generally good at providing a laugh – even if he's a bit grody. His eventual fate as a receptionist brings his arc to a goofy and satisfying conclusion.

Chaos

Final Fantasy I

The first villain of the series might look like a generic demon. However, Chaos has more going for him than just being first in line, as the time-loop ramifications attached to his story add an interesting twist to what would otherwise be a pretty ho-hum villain.

Seifer

Final Fantasy VIII

Seifer is more than just a parallel and rival for Squall. He's also a would-be hero undone by bad choices as opposed to an evil caricature, which gives him an all-too-human quality that's rare for video game characters.

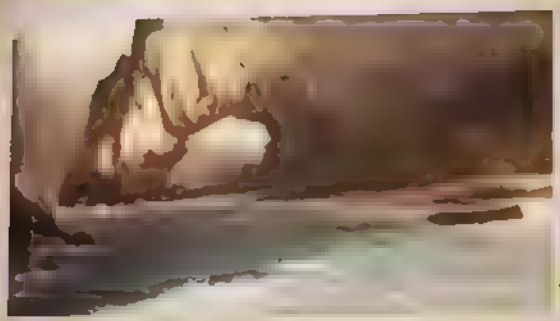
The Good

BATMAN'S Telltale treatment is coming soon. The first episode arrives this summer, and the developer says the decisions players make – as both Batman and Bruce Wayne – impact the experiences of the other. Furthermore, some situations allow you to choose to play them as either persona.

The Bad

LIONHEAD STUDIOS, creators of the Fable franchise, is being closed down by Microsoft Studios, putting approximately 100 employees out of work. This also signals the cancellation of multiplayer game Fable Legends for Xbox One and PC. Lionhead was co-founded in 1996 by gaming luminary Peter Molyneux before being acquired by Microsoft in 2006.

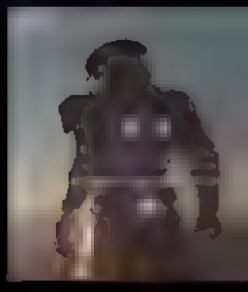
The Ugly



UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END developer Naughty Dog used a piece of concept art from Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag in an Uncharted 4 trailer. Naughty Dog fessed up to the mistake and edited the artwork out of the trailer.

Quotable

"We have Mass Effect, which is our sci-fi action game, in our fourth quarter."



– Electronic Arts CFO Blake Jorgensen puts the release date of Mass Effect Andromeda in the company's fourth fiscal quarter, which occurs from January 1, 2017 through March 31, 2017

Supersonic Acrobatic Unreal Expert

Dave Hagewood is the studio director and CEO of Psyonix, which landed a surprise hit with Rocket League. Before building soccer-playing rocket cars, he found success with Internet businesses, Unreal Tournament mods, and bringing games like Gears of War to life.

Why did you want to make video games, and what was the first major step you took in that direction?
I've always been a programmer. I typed my first program into a computer from the back of a book in the '80s. I was a little kid, like eight years old. I just wanted to play the game that I knew the program was. It kind of started from there. I thought it was so cool that I could put that in, because I typed all the code in. It was like a text adventure, and I knew I could go back and change all the text and make my own game out of that.

From then on, I was really ahead of everybody in school in terms of that. And while I was in college, in the mid-'90s, that was right when the Internet was becoming a big thing. It was a really big deal. There weren't really any classes – well, there were, but the colleges weren't keeping up with how fast the approach of

Internet technology was, and I was inspired at that time by my father – who had started his own engineering company – with the idea of starting my own company. I put the two together and actually dropped out of college and started an Internet company called ArrowWeb. We did Web hosting, selling domain names and websites.

Web hosting was exciting in terms of being on the forefront of cutting edge technology, but I always had this dream of going back to how I started, which was making games.

I found the mod scene, where you could take another game and modify it, and it was a lot like how I started out, taking a text adventure and modifying it, so I adapted to that very quickly. The engine I got into was the Unreal Engine, and my first big break was adding vehicles to Unreal Tournament 2003. Epic saw what I was doing and said, "This is awesome. Why don't you come make a game mode for Unreal Tournament 2004?" and that ended up being Onslaught, which was a huge hit.

How did the offer to create Onslaught come about?

The neat part about that deal was they asked me, "What do you want? Do you want a job? What are you looking for?" I was very upfront with them and I said, "I don't want a job. I have this dream of running my own game studio." I had already built the name Psyonix, but it was mostly just me. I said, "I want to learn as much as possible while I am here about how this amazing company, Epic Games, has been able to be successful. And I want as much support as possible toward the goal of building my own studio, and in exchange I am going to build this studio around Unreal technology, because I am already sold on it anyway." I felt very bullish about Unreal and its potential, and it was a good deal for both of us. The ace up my sleeve is I kind of got mentored by one of the best companies in the industry about how to do things right. And I built my studio based on what I learned there.

Many don't realize Rocket League is a sequel to Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars on PlayStation 3. Do you consider that game a success?

A lot of people don't. It depends on how you define what a success is. Technically, it was a financial success because we eventually made more money on it than we spent, but mostly because we spent very little on it. But it took years for that to pay off. It was disappointing in the sense that we'd hoped we could build something and then it would make money and we could invest and make a new game or make more of that game, and that didn't work out. We had to go back to our day job, which was helping other studios with Unreal Engine development because that's where our expertise was.

The thing about that game is that we knew we'd stumbled on to something. Even in the beginning, even as it wasn't panning out, we knew that our failure was partially how well we were able to polish up the concept and make it sellable to people, but also a big part of it was just awareness. We didn't have any marketing power, we didn't have anything to invest in it, we didn't have a publisher behind us, and we always knew we didn't fail with the game design. We were really on to something; we had made a lot of prototypes out of a lot of different kinds of ideas and some of them had more potential than others, but I don't think anything struck us quite like that concept. It was the most addictive thing we had ever come across, and we recognized it as being more addictive than some of the triple-A games we were playing and we were like, "There is something here, and no one will understand it, because we're talking about cars playing soccer. It's so weird."

What was Psyonix's "day job" exactly, as Unreal experts?

We did quite a lot of different things. Sometimes we were called in as experts on Unreal Engine in general, like for XCOM. Those guys were like, "Hey, we have this video of exactly what we think the game we want to make will look like," and it was just a pre-rendered video. We have so much experience with this one engine that it allowed us to pretty rapidly build up prototypes. We made that in just a few weeks; we made that entire video they showed us in the engine and blew them away with that. It was a great way to kick off a project for them. You've proven that the engine can do this, here's how you implement all this stuff, but that is just one scenario. Other times we were called in as multiplayer experts, and that ended up being kind of a calling card for us eventually.

A lot of the projects you see out there we did the entire multiplayer, or part of the multiplayer. We helped kick off Mass Effect 3's multiplayer from more of a consulting role, but then you go on the other extreme to Bulletstorm, where we basically implemented the entire multiplayer side of that game.

Has Rocket League hit a point of success where you can use it as a base to pursue other projects? Or are you all in on supporting Rocket League?

I think both of those things are actually correct. We're definitely all in on Rocket League, but we have a pretty large team, actually, compared to what it took us to build Rocket League in the first place. It's larger than what we actually need to be all in on Rocket League, to do almost everything we want to do to continue Rocket League. We do want Rocket League to be this base that kind of replaces that contract-work revenue that kept us stable for so long.

We have this massive backlog of really awesome things. We're trying to do this hybrid approach now where we put everything we can back into Rocket League, but are also developing new projects, new exciting things, that we hope to reveal at some point.

You recently partnered with Twitch for the Official Rocket League Championship Series (RLCS). What are you aspirations for Rocket League as an eSport?

We want to take it as far as we can; eSports are very exciting to us. We're still in the early days of it, but I think we had an opportunity that we couldn't afford to not go for, in the sense that we have a sport that is a lot more like a real sport in some ways than some of the games that try to simulate a sport.

ESports is good for the industry in general and maybe it's good for us financially at some point. Right now? It builds popularity around your game and that's always a good thing. It's harder to draw a direct line to how that profits you, but it's good for the game in a more general way, and good for the game industry, and I really want to be part of that. If I can help that part of our industry grow, then I can die happy. I can say, "At least I contributed this major thing to entertainment that affected millions of people around the world."

Are you still programming, or is it all business for you these days?

I really want to. I am struggling with that a little bit. It's hard. Especially when you become as popular as we have, everybody wants to do deals. You've got questions like, do we expand the studio? Do we change things around?" It's very challenging right now, because we're basically changing our business model.

The bottom line I guess is, it's challenging, but it's a priority for me. I want to make sure I am still involved in it.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1983
At eight years old, Hagewood does his first programming – editing the dialogue of a text-adventure game

1985
Hagewood drops out of college, abandoning his computer-science degree to start an Internet company, ArrowWeb

1998
Hagewood finds success in ArrowWeb, an automated Internet business dealing with domains and Web hosting

2000
Hagewood founds Psyonix

2003
Hagewood attracts Epic's attention when he mods Unreal Tournament 2003 to include vehicles

2004
Epic hires Hagewood to develop the successful Onslaught game mode for Unreal Tournament 2004

2008
Psyonix releases its first original, independent game on PlayStation 3: Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars

2011
Psyonix implements the multiplayer for Epic and People Can Fly's Bulletstorm

2012
Psyonix helps lay the groundwork for Mass Effect 3's multiplayer and builds a working prototype of XCOM Enemy Unknown for Firaxis Games

2015
Rocket League releases on PlayStation 4 and PC to wide acclaim and registers nearly 10 million players by the end of the year

2016
Rocket League releases on Xbox One with cross-platform play

ON THE EDGE OF OUR SEATS

ROUNDING UP THE BEST VIDEO GAME CHAIRS

[illegible]

by Ben Reeves

1 DXRacer OH/IB11/NB Performance Chair

DXRacer is practically a household name among pro gamers and streamers. At first, we found the DXRacer to be a little firm, but its high-quality padding quickly conforms to your body, which makes a big difference during long play sessions. The DXRacer also feels incredibly sturdy, and its five-point aluminum base offers great stability and should result in a chair that lasts longer. The arm rests could use more padding, but have a nice range of adjustability. Most importantly, DXRacer's reclining angle of 135 degrees made it the most nap-friendly chair on our list.

The DXRacer has some great features, such as the adjustable head pillow and lumbar support, but some gamers might find the price off-putting.

VERY GOOD

$449 | *dxracer.com*

2 Arozzi Enzo Racing Style Swivel Chair

As the name would suggest, Arozzi's Enzo has a cool racing-inspired design, and this seat is made to ensure comfort for long gaming sessions. Well-padded arm rests and superior lumbar support make this a good choice. Unfortunately, the Enzo was the most challenging chair to assemble. Its screw holes were covered by fabric, and some holes were fixed at odd angles, making the arms hard to attach. The Enzo's manual is also poorly translated and hard to follow.

The Enzo is comfortable, but lacks many of the bells and whistles featured on other gaming chairs.

AVERAGE

$199 | *arozzi.com*

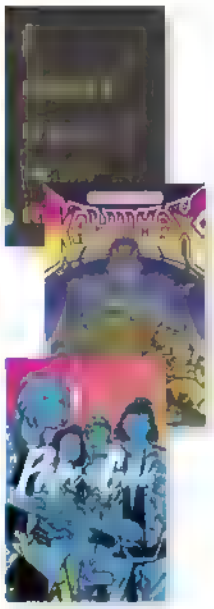
3 X Rocker 51396 Pro Series Gaming Chair

The X Rocker's biggest selling point is its wireless RCA speaker system, which produces solid 2.1 game audio in the chair itself. Unfortunately, the X Rocker falls short in nearly every other area. There is no way to adjust the height or reclining angle of this chair, and the back headrest sits too low, so taller gamers will feel the padding press into their shoulders after only a few minutes. While the X Rocker was incredibly easy to assemble, one of the arm rests remained wobbly no matter how hard we tightened the screws.

The X Rocker feels more like a gimmick and fails to match the level of comfort you find in even a basic office chair. Plus, if you already have a surround-sound system, its extra speakers are pointless.

PASSABLE

$269 | *xrockernation.com*



A BURGLAR'S GUIDE TO THE CITY

The world looks different to criminal masterminds, and author Geoff Manaugh aims to show you how. In this collection of nearly 2,000 years' worth of heists, break-ins, and escapes, Manaugh studies architecture like a burglar, giving readers an X-ray view of even the most secure building.

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KAIJUMAX SEASON 1 BY ZANDER CANNON

Located in the most remote part of the South Pacific is an island called Kaijumax – a cesspool of corruption and pain that functions as a maximum-security prison for giant monsters. The monsters inside Kaijumax are deadly, but the space-superhero wardens are even crueler.

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oni-press.myshopify.com

PAPER GIRLS VOLUME 1 BY BRIAN K. VAUGHAN & CLIFF CHIANG

The sun hasn't even risen on Halloween of 1988, but four 12-year-old newspaper delivery girls are about to discover the most important story of their lives. Award-winning comic creators Brian K. Vaughan and Cliff Chiang join forces for this retro-infused otherworldly mystery.

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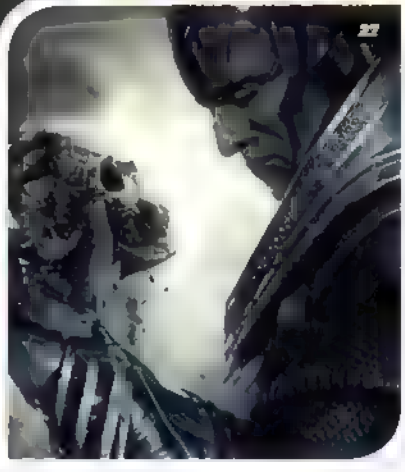
imagecomics.com

timeline



May 2016

03 New Releases
› Battleborn *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

04 Star Wars Day
Expect plenty of excitement in the galaxy far, far away today. Star Wars day will likely bring new teases for both *Star Wars: Rogue One* and *Star Wars: Episode VIII*. Marvel Comics is also celebrating the day with $1 reprints of issue one of *Star Wars, Darth Vader, Lando, Chewbacca, Shattered Empire, Kanan, Star Wars Classic, Vader Down*, and *Droids*.

06 Captain America: Civil War
We have seen many villains in Marvel's Cinematic Universe, but in today's theatrical release, *Captain America: Civil War*, the heroes battle each other. If this story parallels the comic-book series it's based on, expect bloodshed, and a much different universe come credits roll.

13 New Releases
› Doom *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

14 Civil War II
Captain America: Civil War hasn't even been in theaters for 10 days, and Marvel is already cranking on the sequel. The creative team behind *Siege* and *House of M* return with another politically charged chapter that Marvel claims to be "a storyline that fans will be talking about for years." The first issue releases today. Pray for the heroes.

17 New Releases
› Homefront: The Revolution *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

20 The Angry Birds Movie
Hollywood is striking at the heart of Angry Birds' popularity . Wait .. What's that? It's not popular anymore? It hasn't been for years? Regardless of its fall from fame, *The Angry Birds Movie* opens in theaters today. If you're burned out on Rovio's birds, here's a plus. You probably won't recognize them on the silver screen. Unlike the games, all of these birds have limbs. They also talk. So basically, the film is nothing like the game.

24 New Releases
› Mirror's Edge Catalyst *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

25 Scooby Apocalypse
This comic's name says it all. The apocalypse hit in Scooby-Doo's world and now Fred, Daphne, Velma, and Shaggy, must figure out how to survive in the dangerous badlands. This story features new versions of the characters designed by the great Jim Lee. He also wrote the story. The first issue of this odd (and dark) reboot is out today.

27 New Releases
› Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

27 X-Men Apocalypse
Poe Dameron stars in today's theatrical release, *X-Men Apocalypse*, a story about an X-Wing pilot turning into the world's first mutant. Poe plays Apocalypse, an ancient mutant intent on wiping out the entire human race. The film also stars Katniss Everdeen (Mystique) and The-Guy-In-The-Assassin's Creed-Film (Magneto). This is Bryan Singer's fourth time directing an X-Men film. He's helmed all of the good ones.

28 Ship It! Game Jam 2016
Cruise ships are usually reserved for vacationers, but starting today, one will be sailing the seas with over 500 game developers onboard, all working together to create finished video games before the ship docks again. Ship It! Game Jam sets sail in Montreal, and is open to anyone with game-making capabilities.

31 New Releases
› One Piece: Burning Blood *(PS4, Xbox One, Vita)*

SWEEPSTAKES

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Wii U

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*Awarded as a $600 check.

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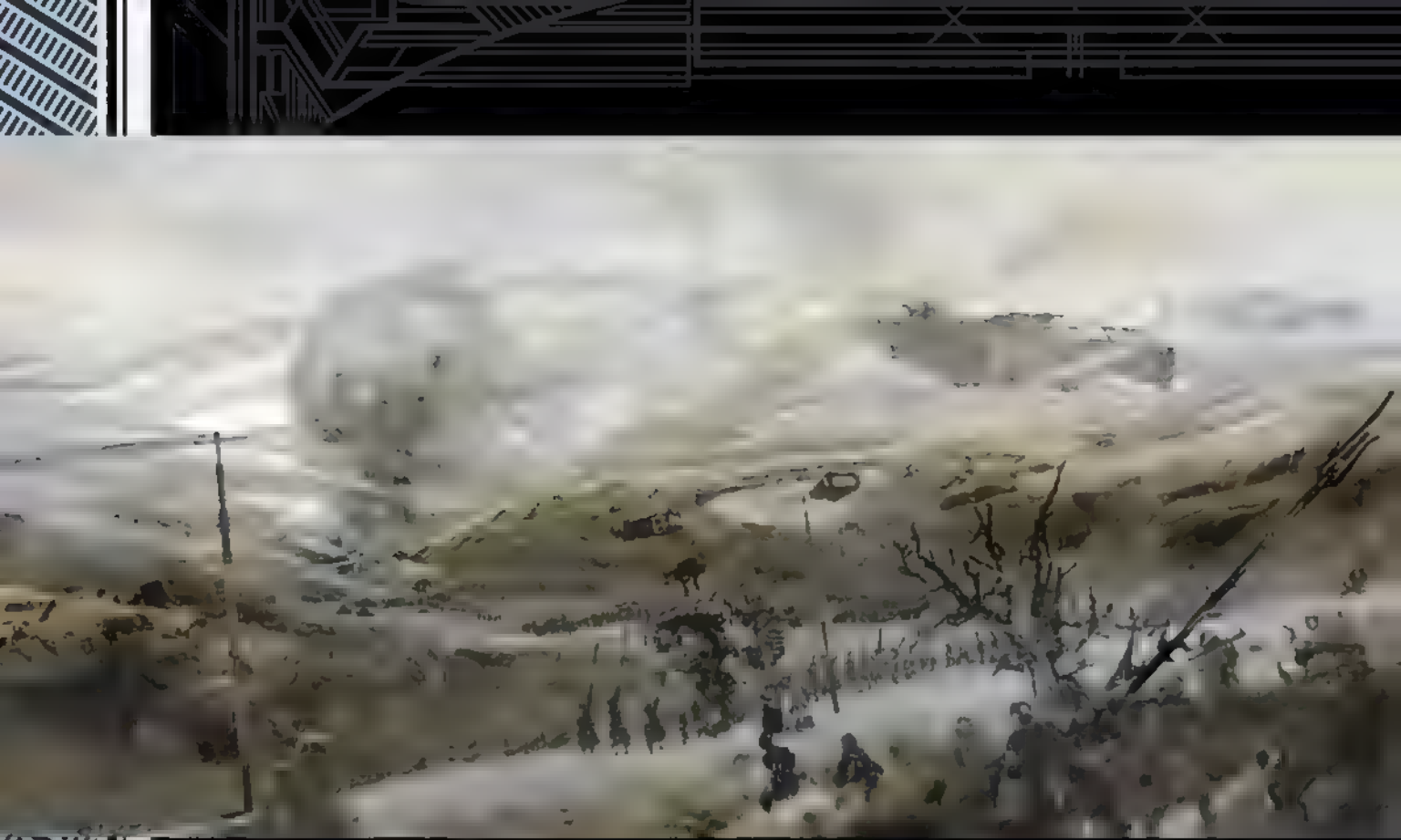
GameStop POWERUP REWARDS

THE CLEARING STORM

Final Fantasy XV emerges from its long development with hopes of reclaiming the RPG crown

by Joe Juba

- Platform
  PlayStation 4
  Xbox One
- Style
  Play Role-Playing
- Publisher
  Square Enix
- Developer
  Square Enix
- Release
  September 30



IN FINAL FANTASY XV, NOCTIS AND HIS BUDDIES EMBARK ON A LONG JOURNEY,

but the young prince also bears the responsibility of his royal heritage. These themes of teamwork and legacy are pillars of the game, but they also surround Final Fantasy XV in the real world. After Square Enix failed to bring Final Fantasy Versus XIII to market after years of development, the project took on new life in 2012 with the official beginning of Final Fantasy XV. Inheriting the expectations that come with a mainline Final Fantasy title, over 300 people are working together to create an experience that lives up to the series' celebrated history. After playing the latest version of Final Fantasy XV for ourselves and talking with the development team in Square Enix's Business Division 2, we've seen proof that the game that began its life as Final Fantasy Versus XIII has transformed. Today, it's an ambitious and impressive project with the potential to not only bring in new players, but also restore old fans' faith in Final Fantasy.

What About PC?

Final Fantasy XV's September 30 release date applies to the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions of the game. Square Enix has not made any official announcements regarding the existence of a PC version, much less its potential release date. Even so, Final Fantasy XV's eventual move to PC seems inevitable to us (all three Final Fantasy XIII games are on the platform now, for instance), but don't count on it launching alongside the console versions.

A SLUMBERING GIANT

Years ago, Final Fantasy was the biggest name in video game role-playing in North America. Before the distinction between Japanese RPGs and Western RPGs had crystalized, it was the pinnacle of the genre – especially on home consoles. From one hardware generation to the next, Final Fantasy titles consistently set the standard for each new era of RPG, challenging conventions and setting new expectations.

Final Fantasy XV director Hajime Tabata knows the brand no longer benefits from this sterling reputation. In 2012, as Tabata came on-board for the project originally announced in 2006 as Final Fantasy Versus XIII, he and his team assessed the franchise's position in the Japanese market. The results showed a once-beloved IP on a downhill slide. Final Fantasy XIII and its spin-offs were divisive, numerous smartphone apps created confusion among consumers, and long development times made it difficult to hold fans' interest. "The gravest situation of all was that, at the time we were starting Final Fantasy XV, we didn't see an increase in new fans of the franchise," Tabata says. "The brand image of Final Fantasy wasn't really clear."

Hearing this straight from the director of a new Final Fantasy might be surprising, but Tabata believes the franchise can't move forward without putting pride aside and taking an honest look at the problems it faces – even if they are unpleasant. "The reality is not that the situation is okay or in favor of us," Tabata says. "Rather, it is more grave and serious than we had initially thought. .The way we understood Final Fantasy after our analysis is that it was a dying IP that had already peaked."

Final Fantasy XV begins with a carefree road trip, but circumstances take a turn for the worse

If things looked so bad, why continue with Final Fantasy XV? "One thing I've felt from fans is that they are disappointed in the current state of Final Fantasy, but still have hope in terms of where the brand could go," Tabata says. In other words, the future for Final Fantasy isn't all doom and gloom; it's an opportunity to bring the series back to the forefront of the RPG landscape.

To accomplish that feat, Tabata and his team at Square Enix's Business Division 2 (BD2) identified three core qualities they believe define the Final Fantasy titles that fans remember fondly – and that players would want from Final Fantasy XV. First is a willingness to challenge the status quo. Second is providing an exceptional, out-of-the-ordinary experience. Third is implementing cutting-edge technology to use the hardware to its fullest.

"I think Final Fantasy VII was the last one where all three of these key points were met," Tabata says. "Any Final Fantasy released after that lacks in one or the other. But what Final Fantasy fans desire is a new entry that encompasses all of these elements, and that is our objective with Final Fantasy XV."

Viewed in this context, Final Fantasy XV isn't just the next inevitable installment of a long-running franchise. It's a make-or-break moment for the series – a chance to win back lapsed fans and introduce a clear, unified vision of Final Fantasy to a new generation of gamers. With its complex themes, open environments, and action-oriented combat, Final Fantasy XV is a departure for the series in many ways – and it still has more surprises in store than you think.

The Niflheim Empire has an army of mechanical warriors called Magitek soldiers

TRANSITIONING TO XV

Fans have been getting bits and pieces of info about this project ever since Final Fantasy Versus XIII was revealed. However, not everything has remained the same during the game's long development. "It's been 10 years since the initial announcement, but it's not like we've been creating one thing for all these years," Tabata says.

When Final Fantasy Versus XIII became Final Fantasy XV in 2012, it was more than assigning a new name to the same game. For one thing, the project was moving to a new generation of hardware, which carried with it a new array of possibilities – and necessitated a change to Square Enix's development approach. "The production methodology of XV from Versus XIII changed from the ground up," Tabata says. "Prior to XV, development of titles of this scale were compartmentalized into various groups. For XV, we created a team structure that brought in different departments and disciplines (CG studio, technology, game design/development) and had them work as one team."

Even more than the behind-the-scenes development, the content of the game itself has changed. In the transition to Final Fantasy XV, the title disconnected from the Fabula Nova Crystallis framework – a mythology originally intended to link Final Fantasy XIII, Final Fantasy Versus XIII, and Final Fantasy Type-0. Additionally, the heroine initially called Stella changed during development; her name is now Luna, since her role has shifted so significantly from the original concept. The team has evaluated practically everything about the original game – the characters, the world, the technology – to see how it fits into the new vision.

Unlike the Duscae region Leide is desolate and sparse

Despite some changes, most of Final Fantasy Versus XIII's hallmarks that tricked out during its development remain intact in Final Fantasy XV. It is still about Noctis and his companions. It still has an evil empire, a realistic setting, and action-based combat. However, beyond those major pillars, don't assume that every tiny detail you've absorbed about the game since 2006 will be in the final product. Instead, it will be a mixture of familiar elements and new features.

"For those aspects of the game that were previously made public – environment, story, and game systems – we tried to retain as much as we could," Tabata says. "For all other facets of the game, we took the opportunity to shape FF XV to the fullest range of our imagination and creativity."

The Logo Remains

Despite all of the changes Final Fantasy XV has undergone over the years, it still uses the same logo illustration that longtime Final Fantasy artist Yoshitaka Amano created for Final Fantasy Versus XIII, albeit with some color adjustments. The image remains intact because it still represents the game appropriately; Amano's logo illustrations are typically done early in the process, so they focus on major characters and broad themes – things unlikely to change over time. "It's in development when these requests come up, so there's not much documentation to go by," Amano says. "But with the information we do have to work with, I take that and interpret that on my own and try to incorporate that and create an illustration out of it." When Square Enix was preparing to announce the project's transition to Final Fantasy XV, the team brought the modified illustration to Amano for his approval. "The impression I had was, 'Oh, it's finally being realized after all this time,'" Amano says.

Creating Monsters

Before Final Fantasy VII, your enemies in Final Fantasy games were just pictures. Apart from some basic attack animations, the creatures you faced never needed to move or engage with your party; they stayed on their side of the screen, and you stayed on yours. With the move to 3D graphics, the demands changed, and they have only escalated since. Today, gamers expect foes that look great, move realistically, and provide tactical challenges. Final Fantasy XV's monsters aim to exceed expectations in all areas.

"The first monster we designed for XV was the Behemoth," says art director Tomohiro Hasegawa. "What Tabata-san said was that our goal was *National Geographic*. Think of a Behemoth that we could have a documentary program about." That involves more than just realistic muscles and cinematic camera angles; the approach works its way into multiple aspects of the creature's design, prompting the team to think about how it has evolved over the years and how it spends time in its natural habitat. The idea is to create an array of enemies that feel real (and deadly) in the world.

Enemy attack patterns were also impacted by this thought process. In other action-driven games, a monster might telegraph its next move clearly – like keeping a paw raised for a second before striking, or sweeping in an easily dodged arc. The Behemoth juts its claws out quickly and ferociously like a predator, making its attacks difficult to avoid.

"Some people said, 'If we do it that way, then it won't really be much of a game,'" Hasegawa says. "But then Tabata-san said, 'Disregard that. Create a living creature.' So we've spent evenings watching videos and studying them."

When you imagine this meticulous design applied to every monster that inhabits the natural world – like Coeurls and Garulas – the prospect of exploring becomes even more inviting. However, not every enemy you meet is a part of the natural world; in addition to human and mechanical foes, Noctis also battles demonic beasts, like the Iron Giant at the end of the Platinum Demo (see page 55). For that category of monster, the team deliberately leaned toward throwback visual designs.

"For the demon types, we tried to focus on things that remained in our fans' memories, and tried to bring them back as much as possible," says lead animator Taisuke Ooe. For example, the half-spider, half-woman Arachne is in the game, and looks like a living incarnation of artist Yoshitaka Amano's original illustration for Final Fantasy IV.

Of course, monsters from all categories will draw some degree of inspiration from previous Final Fantasy titles. Other familiar enemies we noticed include the Malboro, Cactuar, Tonberry, and Naga – plus a few others that we're not going to spoil. However, seeing new life breathed into some of these opponents will be a real treat for longtime fans.

THE STORY SO FAR

In its new form, Final Fantasy XV is a story revolving around friendship, destiny, and legacy. Players control Noctis, the young prince of the kingdom of Lucis. If you played Episode Duscae (the lengthy demo released in March 2015), you already know the companionship between Noctis and his three buddies – Gladiolus, Ignis, and Prompto – is one of the main themes of Final Fantasy XV. However, understanding Noctis' other relationships is important to comprehending the full scope of the narrative.

Noctis' mother died when he was young, so he lives with his father, King Regis, in the capital city of Lucis, Insomnia. One of the keys to the nation's power is its crystal – a powerful magical object with a will of its own. Another is the royal ring worn by the king, containing the wisdom of previous rulers of Lucis. Noctis will inherit responsibility for both one day, which contributes to the unique bond between father and son – one of the key threads running through the story. Even though Noctis and Regis are physically apart for most of the game, their connection is emphasized in various ways, including the constant presence of Regis' car, the Regalia.

At the beginning of the game, Noctis leaves Insomnia in the Regalia, intending to travel to Altissia to marry Luna – a woman he has known since childhood. Though the marriage is ostensibly a political one uniting Lucis and Luna's home nation of Tenebrae, the two already have an established history and a complex relationship – though don't expect their love story to be a typical one. "There is love from Luna," Tabata says. "Noctis probably just doesn't have the confidence to respond to that love."

Underpinning all of this is the presence of the technologically advanced Niflheim Empire, which has been conquering territory and is at war with Lucis, hoping to gain control of its crystal. Noctis and Luna's marriage is part of a negotiation to end hostilities. However, even more frightening than this human threat is the fact that the world itself is changing; the nights are getting longer, and unless something can be done, perpetual darkness will overcome the land.

That's the starting point for the events of Final Fantasy XV, setting the stage for the numerous twists and turns. While the general situation sounds grim, the story is told from the perspective of Noctis and his childhood friends as they travel together, which provides the opportunity to insert levity in the face of adversity. "The overarching story of the game is definitely hefty and serious," Tabata says. "Of course, Noctis will face his destiny and grow emotionally, but it doesn't necessarily mean that their road trip will be grave and serious throughout. It's more natural to have that fun element to it. So, it's really combining the naturalness and the seriousness to create the human drama of Final Fantasy XV."

This is the original concept art for The Regalia, though its design has evolved since

The Regalia

It's not much for banter or combat, but the car Noctis takes on his journey is just as significant as the friends who ride with him. The vehicle is called the Regalia, and it is a one-of-a-kind machine that belongs to King Regis. When Noctis departs on his journey, he takes his father's car, but it ends up being a symbol of Regis' presence as events carry Noctis across the world.

"There are three aspects to the car in this game," says director Hajime Tabata. "The first is the story. The son is traveling the world in his father's car, so it connects to the father/son relationship. The second is the car as a form of transport. The last is that it's also something that is customizable." The team isn't revealing much about that third aspect yet, but we did discuss how to design a vehicle fit for a king.

"In terms of creating the car, we had one big objective: Design a convertible that was valued at $500,000," says artist Yuusaku Nakaaki. "The reason we did that was, regardless of any individual artist's preferences, we had to create a design that looked expensive and royal from anyone's eyes."

Most players know a fancy car when they see one, but from a design perspective, designing a car to look expensive is a challenge. To create the appropriate effect, the art team needed to zero in on an array of small nuances. "It's the quality of the materials and texture," Nakaaki says. "We actually went on location to places like Rolls Royce, experiencing and looking at and feeling what an actual expensive car is. And we would look at the details, like what type of materials and paints were used to lend different qualities. Those details accumulate into that expensive look and feel, and we tried to implement that into the game."

You have the Regalia with you throughout the journey. It's essentially a family heirloom, and Noctis isn't going to leave it behind. Even when you need to travel by boat or train, it comes along. "The car itself is obviously very important because it's closely knit with the story, but that isn't to say the other transport methods are less important," Tabata says. "They're all important to get a good sense of the world."

Dungeons are built into the continuous world, rather than transitioning into separate maps

Who Is The Villain?

With the world facing a supernatural threat, not to mention the various powerful individuals in the Niflheim Empire, narrowing down the field to one antagonist might seem difficult. However, a single figure does eventually emerge as your foe. "It's not an ensemble cast of villains," says director Hajime Tabata. "There's clearly one evil entity in the game." Though Tabata doesn't want to spoil the villain's identity for players, he does offer some insight about the qualities he thinks are necessary in a good antagonist: "I think a good villain is a character that you could potentially create a project or game around as the main character – one with a clear background and drama."

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The team at BD2 is happy to establish the characters' relationships and the state of the world, but one aspect about the beginning of the game remains guarded: chapter zero. "As soon as you start the game, there is a yet-to-be-revealed location where a battle occurs," Tabata says. "This is similar to Final Fantasy II, where you start the game and go straight into a boss battle. The image is quite similar to that, and it also acts as a tutorial. After that, chapter one will begin."

Our hands-on time with Final Fantasy XV picks up right after the mysterious opening sequence, which we aren't allowed to see. We start with Noctis and his friends on the road en route to Altissia, having left Lucis and the city of Insomnia behind. The Regalia has broken down in the region of Leide, and the crew needs to get out and push it to the nearest gas station. This is players' first interaction with the open world of Final Fantasy XV – holding down the right trigger while they slowly look around and take in the surrounding mountains, rocks, and vegetation.

The term "open world" has grown to mean more than a description of an environment; it carries certain expectations for exploration, quests, and structure. With that in mind, describing Final Fantasy XV as an open-world experience is not entirely appropriate. It isn't about creating your own emergent story, finding a new sidequest around every corner, or getting wrapped up in a district-conquering metagame. "From the start of development, we set out to make something that wasn't completely free-roaming, open-world," Tabata says. "The technology is definitely built on an open-world, but the way we approach this freedom aspect is to not have freedom come first, and then us implement the quests. Rather, we have the story first then create as much freedom as we can within that story."

This means the technical backbone is focused on creating an expansive and interesting environment, but it doesn't sacrifice the narrative-driven experience fans expect. This expansion is part of the game's mission to modernize Final Fantasy, especially after the linear nature of Final Fantasy XIII left a poor impression on many players. "When you're looking at the landscape of triple-A RPGs, every series has already experienced an open-world type of environment," Tabata says. "I felt like Final Fantasy needed to tackle that kind of environment, or else that question of 'what if' would always be present. We didn't want us not trying an open-world Final Fantasy to become an excuse."

The vast expanse is a bit intimidating, but players aren't thrown into it right away. After pushing the car for a bit (and listening to some lighthearted conversation), the scene cuts and the foursome arrives at the Hammerhead, a gas station and repair shop run by the mechanic Cid and his granddaughter Cindy. For those who played Episode Duscae, this probably sounds familiar, but don't be concerned that the Regalia is breaking down constantly. It doesn't happen in Leide and then again in Duscae; the team just borrowed that plot point from earlier in the game when creating the demo. "In the main game, it's probably just that once when [the car] breaks down and you need to fix it," Tabata says. "With Episode Duscae, we had it narrowed down to the area we wanted people to play and enjoy, and that's why we set it so the car would be broken down and unusable."

At the Hammerhead, Noctis and company confer with the gruff Cid, who recognizes Noctis (saying he looks like Regis, but without the dignity). Cid assures them that the Regalia can be fixed, but it's going to take time, leaving the group temporarily stranded in the middle of nowhere.

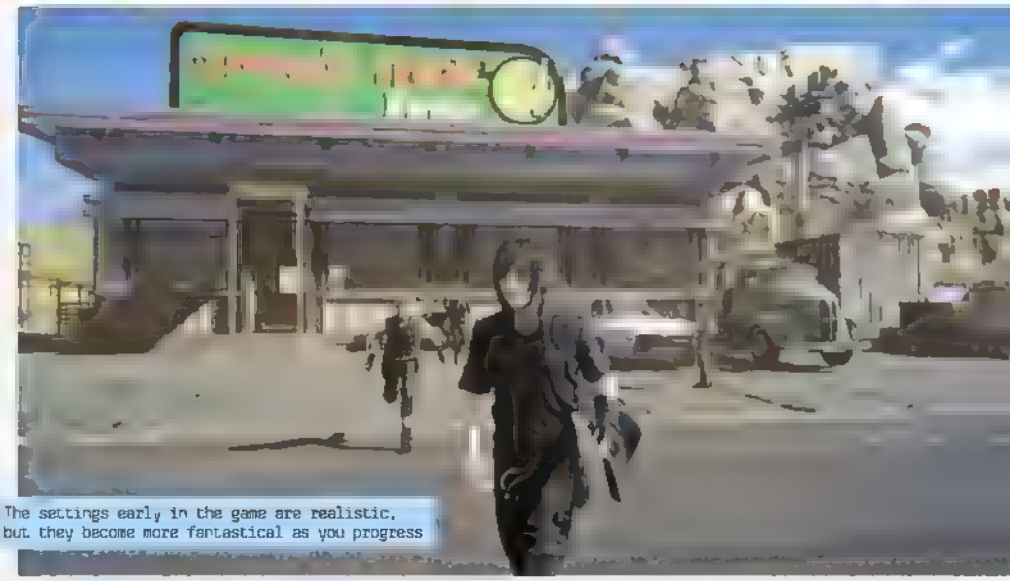
Cars aren't the group's only mode of transportation

A FANTASY BASED ON REALITY

Trailers for Final Fantasy Versus XIII proclaimed, "This is a fantasy based on reality." While many things about the project have changed, that principle still holds true in Final Fantasy XV. If the skyscrapers of Insomnia or the Regalia or the power lines along the road in Leide don't convey that message, spending a few minutes at the Hammerhead should clinch it. The roadside oasis is surprisingly recognizeable, with all the hallmarks of a rural rest stop. Noctis walks around the station to check in with Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio. Along the way, we see a convenience store, a diner, gas pumps, and a trailer home that functions as an inn – all while a twangy instrumental version of "Heart of Gold" plays in the background. These elements all help establish a distinct atmosphere and setting, but they're not quite what one expects from Final Fantasy.

"When you're looking at previous Final Fantasies, something that stands out is the unique, fantasy-oriented designs," says art director Tomohiro Hasegawa. "That was the nature of how those titles were designed, but we narrowed down the points in which we reached that fantasy level. We were very particular about choosing the moments to showcase in that fashion. There are aspects geared toward that fantasy, but narrowed down. Everything is grounded and designed academically."

Don't worry: Final Fantasy XV still has those fantasy elements. However, the beginning of the game is heavy with more familiar imagery, bringing players into the fold with comfortable surroundings before gradually bending things toward the wondrous. Whether real or far-fetched, the goal is to make everything feel authentic and believable within the world. "The ultimate endpoint is that everything is 'real,'" Tabata says. "Even if it's more of a fantastical



The settings early in the game are realistic, but they become more fantastical as you progress

creature, our thought process is based on, 'What would it do if it was a real creature inhabiting this world?' Everything is based on that general line of thinking."

After soaking in the sights of the Hammerhead, we stay at the trailer/inn (complete with plastic lawn furniture out front), earning a 1.5x experience bonus that will expire at the end of the day. Then we continue the main story quest, conferring with Cindy to check on the state of the repairs. She asks what we need, which introduces a new decision-making wrinkle in the storytelling.

Noctis has three choices for his response: asking for a discount, asking for a loan, and asking his friends for advice. We select the last option, and Gladio chimes in to see if there's a way to earn a little spending money nearby. Cindy offers to pay the group in exchange for some work, and we also see the result of our choice: Gladio liked that we deferred to him, and Noctis receives a temporary attack boost of 50 percent, which expires at the end of the day. You may get a different bonus (or no bonus at all) for selecting other options, and this holds true when making decisions in other scenarios.

These bonuses are similar to the ones you get for eating or resting, so the idea isn't to penalize the player for making the "wrong" choice. "It allows you to change your adventure and playstyle based on the boosts you have on any given day," Tabata says. "For example, if you don't have many boosts, you might decide to level your character that day and roam around freely. So, it directly impacts the way you strategize." In this case, the extra bump in power is particularly helpful, because Cindy needs some monsters slain.

Meeting The Cast

The characters and their relationships drive the story Final Fantasy XV, so it's important to know who's who. Players will meet and learn about other important players along the way, but here's who you should recognize as the tale begins.

Noctis

At first, Noctis may seem like a "blank slate" protagonist for players to identify with. However, that isn't the case; the prince of Lucis is a complex and isolated individual, and takes more time to understand than his compatriots.

Gladiolus

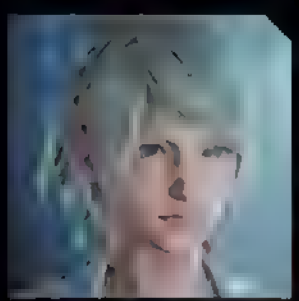
What you see is what you get with Gladiolus – a strong and bold man who knows how to use a blade. The warrior comes from a family that has long protected the royal line of Lucis, but his friendship with Noctis isn't obligatory.

Ignis

If you need a plan, Ignis has it. He's not the group's leader, but he is its main tactician, ensuring that everyone knows what they're doing and why. He also knows how to cook, and keeps his friends well-fed with diverse cuisine.

Prompto

You can't stay mad at Prompto. He's not the smartest or the strongest in the group, but his abilities to keep his friends' spirits up is invaluable – when he isn't getting everyone into more trouble, of course.



Luna

In addition to being determined and intelligent, Luna is also an Oracle – an individual with the power to commune with the gods. She and Noctis are childhood friends and even have a romantic connection, but their upcoming marriage is a political one.

Regis

Bearing the responsibility of the Lucian throne, King Regis tries to be a good father to Noctis. He teaches his son to be a good steward of the kingdom and the crystal, while also shielding him from the dangers of the crown.

Iedolas

As the emperor of the Niflheim Empire, Iedolas has a sinister reputation. Niflheim's influence has expanded under his rule, but he also is less active than he once was in the management of the empire. Most of those duties now fall to his chancellor, Ardyn.

Ardyn

The chancellor of the Niflheim Empire seems built for politics. He has an unassuming demeanor, but clearly knows more than he lets on. That's a necessary trait for someone effectively running the world's most powerful political entity.

Battles are action oriented, but they don't require a prohibitive amount of precision.

ENTERING THE FRAY

Final Fantasy titles have gradually been steering away from the traditional turn-based mode, but Final Fantasy XV marks a full entry into action-based combat. All battles happen right in the open world, with you controlling Noctis directly while the A.I. handles his companions. This departure may seem drastic, but the move to action comes from analyzing what system would synchronize best with the team's vision, not a desire to imitate other RPGs.

"When we started Final Fantasy XV, the idea was to create an experience where you would journey through the world – a sense of adventure – as well as doing this all with your friends," Tabata says. "When you think about the overarching themes, it made more sense to go the action route rather than the turn-based route, because it allows you to be more immersed and creates a livelier game. It started with the theme, and then the best system to fit that goal was action-based."

Heading out into the wastes surrounding the Hammerhead, Noctis gets his first taste of battle. Cindy needs three groups of monsters taken out, so we follow the objective marker to a pack of Sabertusks, dog-like beasts many players will remember from Episode Duscae. The first thing we notice is how much the combat has improved since the demo last year; not only do controls feel more responsive, but the ability to quick-swap your weapons on the d-pad is a great addition. Moving from a lance to a greatsword with a single button press is more entertaining and intuitive than the previous system, and is more natural for players who are familiar with action games.

This means you can seamlessly switch among four equipped options, even though it only gives you easy access to a fraction of your arsenal. However, switching out your quick slots in the menu is simple; you can fill them with weapons, tools, and attacks of all varieties. For instance, we saw tabs for swords, daggers, lances, firearms, shields, royal arms (like a phantom shuriken), and elemental spells. We even saw a category called "machines," though we didn't have any items of that classification to equip. Each type of weapon has different advantages, so you can experiment with them all and find a loadout that suits your playstyle. We found the power of the greatsword hard to resist, despite its slower attacks.

After offing the Sabertusks, we hunt down the second and third groups of monsters (rhinocerous-like Dualhorns and scorpion-like Reapertails, respectively). During the course of these battles, we try various additional techniques, like teleporting around the battlefield with Noctis' warp strike, and slashing while airborne – a more effective form of attack, but one that costs MP. However, MP functions more like stamina at this phase, since your warp and air maneuvers are the primary skills that consume it, along with a defensive stance that lets you dodge and counter enemy attacks.

Your party travels to many different cities and runs into all sorts of denizens.

We also try some elemental spells: fire and blizzard (thunder is in the game too, but not in the version we're playing). Attacking your foes with physical techniques feels almost automatic, but using magic requires some finesse. They are aimed attacks, so trajectory and blast indicators appear when you initiate the spell. You hold the button while you fine-tune the placement, then release it to let the spell fly. This makes it difficult to use multiple spells in rapid succession, since they require you to be deliberate. The effort pays off with impressive visual effects, setting the ground ablaze or creating a deep freeze in a wide area. Be careful not to hit your party members, though, since they can be damaged by friendly fire.

Instead of just inherently knowing spells, you need to collect them like a resource, and each use diminishes your supply. You can recharge at various places on the map, but we overzealously blew our whole stock in a single fight. Suffice it to say, a pack of Reapertails are no match for repeated flame eruptions. These few introductory fights don't showcase the full array of Final Fantasy XV's combat system, but they still give players a sense of its flexibility and fluidity. It currently evokes the stylish visual flair of series like Devil May Cry, though requiring a lesser degree of precision and skill.

When the final Reapertail falls, Noctis gets a call from Cindy. Her quest isn't finished yet; she wants the group to track down a hunter named Dave. Apparently Dave was hunting a powerful monster nearby, and he might be in trouble. We head to his last known location, an empty barn. As we move from one stage of the quest to the next, all of the objective locations are clearly marked, so we don't need to wander too far in the wilderness. Even though this early questline seems designed to keep players close to home, it provides a sense of the massive world around them – and the danger waiting for those who are unprepared.

When the party finally tracks down Dave, he's incapacitated by a sprained ankle he suffered in a fight against some mutant beasts. He asks if we can help him out, and we have another opportunity to choose: Noctis can help for free, do it for a price, or again defer to his friends. We go for the virtuous option, but we get no special bonus this time.

Tracking down the mutated Sabertusk and killing it isn't difficult; the most interesting part of the battle is seeing Noctis' Armiger super-move in action. Regulated by a gauge that gradually fills as you fight, activating Armiger surrounds Noctis with an array of phantom blades, and every strike is backed up by additional attacks from these ghostly weapons. It increases your damage output considerably, so the encounter against Dave's nemesis is over quickly. After a brief chat with Cindy on the phone, Noctis learns that the Regalia is ready for pick-up, and the party begins the lengthy on-foot journey back to the Hammerhead.

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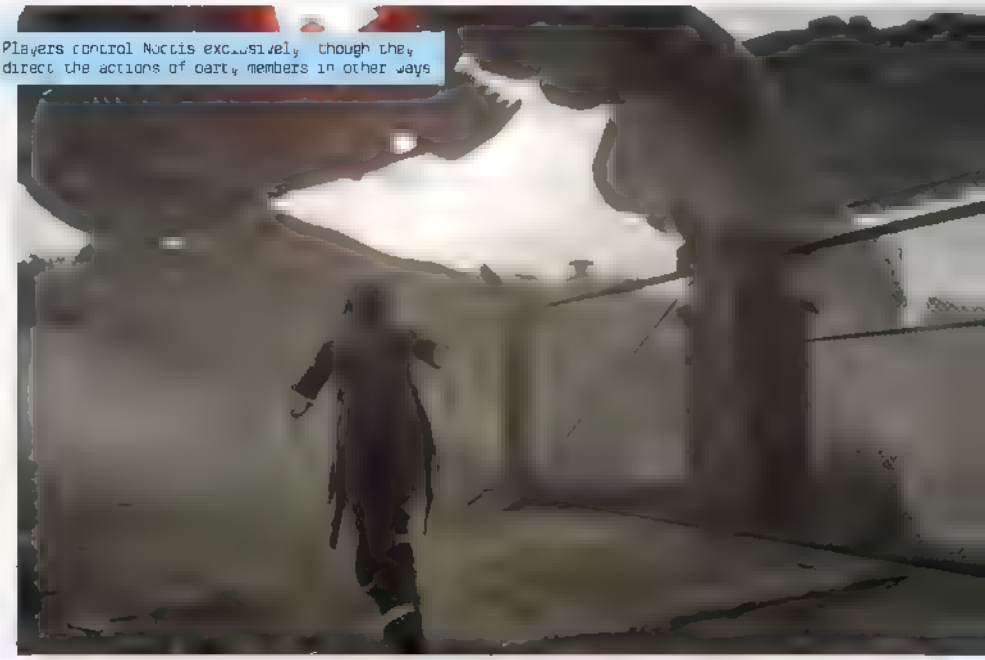


Players control Noctis exclusively, though they direct the actions of party members in other ways

You can rest, eat meals, and pick up monster hunts at various stops along the way

The Expanding Final Fantasy Universe

A massive single-player RPG is obviously the core of the Final Fantasy XV experience, but Square Enix is developing other forms of content set in the same universe to support the story of Noctis and his friends. Prior to the main game's release, you can enjoy a movie, an episodic animation, and a mobile app related to Final Fantasy XV. While these other ventures may provide entry points for new kinds of players, they also help dedicated fans learn more about the characters and setting before diving into the full experience.

Kingsglaive

Similar to *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, *Kingsglaive* is a full-length CG movie. However, director Takeshi Nozue (who is the director for both projects) sees an important distinction between them. "*Advent Children* wasn't really a movie," Nozue says. "It was more of a video feature, in essence. Movies have a proper story, and that story needs to be expressed to the audience. That's probably the biggest difference between *Advent Children* and this project." In other words, *Kingsglaive* isn't just an extended cutscene intended for a dedicated audience; it tells its own story, and can be understood independently.

Kingsglaive occurs in parallel to the events of Final Fantasy XV. The game follows Noctis as he leaves on his journey, while the movie remains focused on the city of Insomnia and the characters there. "An overarching theme of the FF XV universe in general is the bond between the father and the son and the relationship they have," Nozue says. "The game itself features the son, while the movie features the father."

King Regis' struggle at home isn't the only focal point of *Kingsglaive*. Once the armistice goes bad, the story follows a soldier named Nyx – a member of the titular Kingsglaive, King Regis' magical special forces – on his quest to escort Luna to safety. While the heroine is a distant figure for some of Final Fantasy XV, she is front-and-center in *Kingsglaive*. "Luna's role is very big," Nozue says. "She's the key to everything. Of course, you can still understand who Luna is and what she is just by playing FF XV. But the core of who she is and her feelings toward Noctis is more deeply featured in the movie."

Despite all of the connections, *Kingsglaive* isn't required

viewing before playing Final Fantasy XV. The link between the two has more to do with your attachment to the characters than knowledge of specific plot events. "I want the emotions to link back to the game – people's feelings towards Noctis, and their perception of how the throne weighs on the king," Nozue says. Viewers will then carry that knowledge with them into Final Fantasy XV, enriching the experience and giving them a head start on understanding the cast.

Brotherhood

When Final Fantasy XV starts, Noctis and his companions are already good friends, and have been for years. This free, five-part animated series lets viewers learn more about how those bonds developed. In the first episode (which is already available), Noctis is injured – the same injury that sends him into the dream world depicted in the Platinum Demo. The subsequent episodes convey how Noctis lays the foundation for the strong relationships that support him later in life.

Episodes two, three, and four each focus on Noctis' bond with one of his friends: Gladiolus, Prompto, and Ignis. The final episode is more about Noctis resolving his current situation, but as a whole, the series provides insight into the characters. "You begin the game with the understanding that they are already friends," says producer Akio Ofuji. "We really want our consumers to have an idea where these friendships originated. That said, we have some battle sequences, as well. It's actually a good depiction of the gameplay in cel-animation form."

Like *Kingsglaive*, key plot events from *Brotherhood* aren't likely to be referenced directly in the main game. It's more about providing context. "The links aren't clearly defined, but it gives you a better idea of why the characters act the ways they do in the game," Ofuji says. "Because you know what Prompto's childhood was like, that serves as a reference while you're playing the game."

Justice Monsters Five

A free-to-play mobile app for iOS and Android, Justice Monsters Five is like a Final Fantasy version of pinball. The game exists within Final Fantasy XV universe; players may run across it in gas stations and other locations, and it stars a popular squad of five monster heroes who fight evil. Though the action looks pretty crazy – with numbers and visual effects popping off everywhere – producer Daisuke Motohashi assures us that "it's a game you'll understand once you play it."

Justice Monsters Five is a breezier affair than the other supporting content. It's built for quick, fun play sessions, and has a more lighthearted aesthetic. It doesn't have any content or feature tie-ins with the main game, but still provides a way to engage with universe before Final Fantasy XV's release. "We feel like we were kind of beat to it by Fallout Shelter and Fallout 4," Motohashi says. "But similarly, we'd like to get people on-board with an app in advance – and hopefully drive them toward the main game." We won't have to wait long to see if the strategy works, since Justice Monsters Five is releasing "soon," according to Square Enix.

continued from page 49

THE ROAD TRIP CONTINUES

Having regained their wheels, Noctis and friends can continue their travels. From a gameplay perspective, the Regalia is extremely useful; it has a trunk that acts as party storage, and it allows you to set a destination and drive there automatically (though even long journeys still occur in real-time). You need to pay some money to gas up from time to time, but the cost isn't prohibitive, and the advantage of quick transportation makes it feel like a world of possibilities is opening up.

We set the Regalia to manual steering, press a button to lower the convertible top, tune the radio to a remixed version of the Final Fantasy theme, and hit the highway. In this situation, the sense of a road trip finally begins to take hold. As we drive to our destination (a motel where Cindy wants us to deliver something for her), the feeling of comradery builds quickly through incidental interactions. A joke here or an observation there – soon you feel like you're starting to get to know the characters you're traveling with.

On the way, Prompto asks if we can stop to take a picture. Turning him down seems cruel since he wants to document the journey, so we pull off the road. After running a short distance, the party arrives at a large rock outcropping. Prompto gets his picture (which players will be able to see at camp and share on social media), and the party turns back toward the car. With enough time and similar pit stops, Prompto's photography improves, resulting in better pictures.

In fact, all four of the main characters have special talents that get better as the story progresses. Noctis can fish, Ignis can cook, and Gladiolus has survival instincts. Investing time in these activities throughout the adventure provides a bit of extra character development, but it also has more obvious rewards. "For example, the more fish you catch, the more your skill improves," Tabata says. "You'll get access to new rods and lures, which enables you catch rarer fish. You can then cook that fish and get greater stat boosts."

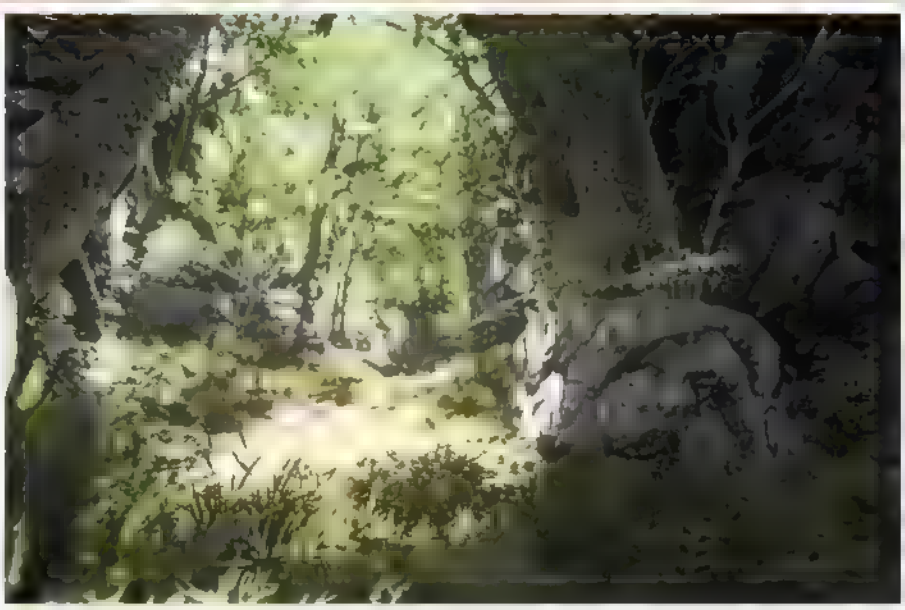
The connection between Noctis and his companions isn't only obvious in quiet story moments; it also comes through in battle. On the basic level, everyone is attacking the same enemies, so there's a sense of teamwork there. "In Episode Duscae, a lot of the A.I. was just charging at the monsters and dying off right away," Tabata says. "But we've resolved the situation so that doesn't happen anymore."

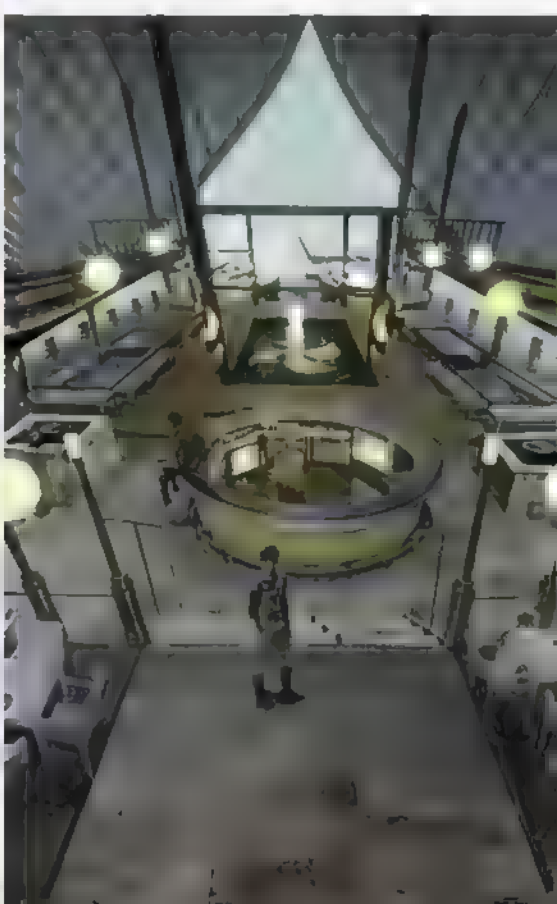
Going deeper, players have the ability to direct their allies' actions through special commands. A recharging meter dictates when Noctis can execute one of these orders, but it fills up fast enough that you almost always have one ready when you want it. For example, the move called Tempest that Noctis could perform in Episode Duscae is now a command given to Gladiolus instead. Prompto can perform a gun technique called Kickback Blast. Ignis can be ordered to charge the party's weapons with elemental power, or mark multiple enemies for Noctis to warp-strike in rapid succession. Moves like these are effectively just extra attacks, but the element of cooperation goes a long way to making your group feel connected.

"First and foremost, we came up with a system where the player would be fully engaged with the main character, and the party would move independently," Tabata says. "On top of that, we also wanted to create an elevated sense that you are playing alongside other players, in terms of this coordinated gameplay."

As the icing on the cake, sometimes you receive special prompts in battle just for being near an ally. If you press the button, you can execute a special dual attack – a revamped version of the combos seen in Episode Duscae. For example, Noctis and Ignis team up for an attack called X-Strike. All of these interactions, from the car to the battlefield, reinforce Noctis' bond with his friends.

Most places you visit have parking accommodations for the Regalia





Calling For Help

Ever since the early days of the franchise, players' ability to summon supernatural creatures has been a staple of the Final Fantasy experience. These showpiece sequences have a tendency to make gamers' jaws drop – but the "wow" factor of summons seems diminished in recent installments. Thankfully, redemption is within reach; Final Fantasy XV is bringing awe back to these iconic creatures.

Almost every summon has two facets: a boss battle, and an impressive attack sequence. Anyone who finished Episode Duscae was likely amazed by the Ramuh summon at the end – a gigantic being descending from the sky, picking Noctis up, and scorching the land with a searing bolt of lightning. Power like that doesn't come easy; you need to prove your worth in elaborate encounters against the beasts – referred to as either Astrals or Archaeans in the game.

"The battle composition is a little bit different," says director Hajime Tabata. "Because you have Noctis' home country at war with an enemy nation, it isn't always just player versus summons. It's also players versus summons versus the enemy state – there are other battle factors." For example, we saw a glimpse of the Leviathan battle in the game's debut trailer as Final Fantasy XV.

Creating a spectacle on such a massive scale happens through close collaboration between the art and tech teams at BD2. "In the old days, the monster team would develop the design, then hand it off to the technology team to see what we could do," says 3D CG graphics director Akira Iwata. "But XV isn't like that; the technology and the art is more merged."

"In the case of Ramuh, we had given them a procedural sky system," says lead graphics engineer Sharif Elcott. "The sky can get dark when you summon him in a really convincing way, whereas in a previous generation, you'd just darken the sky. In that case, the tech was informing the design. An example of the other case is Leviathan – a lot of what she needs drove feature requests on the water systems."

This level of communication and cooperation is important for pulling off stunning set-piece moments, but sometimes one team needs to lead the charge. "For the summon, we pass it to the technology team and let them decide how it will be summoned," says art director Tomohiro Hasegawa. "That team pushes our technology to the limits to ensure that the sequence will be successful and impressive. The artists come up with lots of ideas, but at the end of the day, we leave it to the technology team."

In order to rekindle the amazement surrounding summons, the team is focusing on making them feel like entities that exist in the world – not just monsters that swoop in for a quick attack. That means giving them the physicality and presence to be imposing, in addition to making them react to the environment and situation around them. The latest summon to be revealed, Titan, is an excellent example of this philosophy. For his standard attack, the hulking giant bounds up to Noctis, picks him up in one hand, then slams his other fist down for an earth-shattering impact. Titan's size and mobility in the world is surprising, and it makes the sequence look great, but that's not necessarily what you see every time you summon him.

"When called upon, Titan will think and react depending on where he is in relation to Noctis," Iwata says. "For example, maybe it's closer to run, or maybe it's easier to throw a boulder. Or he may give up and go home! So there are these different action triggers that determine his events." In addition, if players are in a dungeon, summons will be able to find them and perform alternate attacks – like Ramuh piercing the ground with his staff. Even the means of summoning changes. Depending on their personality, the conditions for calling on the Archaeans are different. This kind of adaptability, coupled with the overall visual quality of the creatures, should bring back the excitement and anticipation to summoning that has been missing in recent installments.

So, what other primal beings will lend you their power? Right now, we can't reveal more than Ramuh, Carbuncle, Titan, and Leviathan...but we can say that Final Fantasy fans will be happy (though not necessarily surprised) in terms of the other Astrals Noctis enlists.

Fishing is Noctis' special skill, but his friends have their own hidden talents

TROPICAL GETAWAY

The next main story beat after gaining full use of the Regalia is delivering Cindy's package. Noctis and company pull up to a shabby-looking motel at the Longwythe Rest Area and find the intended recipient: a dog. It isn't just any dog, though – it's Umbra, an animal that Noctis has known since he was a child. Umbra is the darker of two dogs that work for Luna (the other one is white), acting as a messenger and performing other tasks. They aren't exactly pets, but more like faithful servants.

Upon approaching the canine and delivering Cindy's package, a brief flashback sequence plays showing young Noctis and Luna talking in a white room, with the two dogs lying nearby. She hands him a book with a pressed flower from Tenebrae inside – an item with an important meaning between Noctis and Luna, though the significance isn't fully explained here. Then the scene returns to the present, and Noctis sends Umbra away with the delivery, finishing his last bit of business for Cindy.

The party then sets out for the port of Gaidin Quay, hoping to catch a ferry that will take them (and the Regalia) to Altissia for Noctis' wedding. Gaidin Quay is a bit of a drive, but the view is worth it; it's a small-but-beautiful town that brings to mind a Caribbean resort. Wooden docks stretch out over the water, and tropical music plays in the background – but the party isn't here for a vacation.

As Noctis approaches the ferry dock, players have their first encounter with Ardyn, the chancellor of Niflheim pulling the empire's strings. He seems a bit dishevelled in appearance and distracted in demeanor – not exactly an evil mastermind. He tells the party the ferry service has been suspended, musing about whether it has something to do with the peace treaty signing in Lucis. While this statement doesn't make sense to Noctis at the time, players who have watched *Kingsglaive* (see page 50) will understand the significance; the movie's events happen in parallel to the game's, and it details the tragic events that would cause nations to restrict travel.

Noctis and his friends will find out the truth soon enough, but first they check the dock to confirm Ardyn's claim. Their route to Altissia is indeed closed, but the party doesn't have much time to deliberate before a man named Dino approaches and asks if Noctis can do him a favor and fetch a rare piece of ore. If you choose to run Dino's errand, you have to leave Gaidin Quay briefly to hunt for the ore, which also takes you dangerously close to an enormous sleeping bird monster called Zu. If you refuse, the story simply continues, and Noctis and his friends stay the night in the tropical paradise.

Dino's request is one of the few clear side quests we encounter in chapter one, but that doesn't mean you won't have plenty of activities to keep you busy, especially as the story progresses. "There are broadly four quest types," Tabata says. "One being more leisurely or fun, including fishing and chocobo-related quests and minigames (like chocobo races). Another type would be main story quests. The third would be monster hunts, and the fourth is local or regional quests you get in different areas. There are currently over 200 quests, and we're still making more."

This is blizzara in action, the upgraded version of your basic ice spell

Not everything you can do is a formalized quest, either. As we are out driving on Dino's errand, we came across a goblin-infested mine. This is more of a traditional Final Fantasy dungeon, full of twisting hallways and enemy encounters. It isn't a separate or new map from the one we've been traveling; it's just a different part of the same connected world. We don't have a particular quest pointing us toward the mine (that may come later), but the area is still open to exploration. Just be careful, since the party can also venture into areas with foes beyond their current level.

Final Fantasy XV definitely isn't The Witcher 3 or Dragon Age Inquisition in terms of your to-do list. That isn't necessarily bad, because your quest log also isn't bloated by insignificant or uninteresting tasks. You still have things to do, but the map isn't packed with quest-givers or activities, which may surprise someone looking for a typical open-world experience. However, the space and time between events can also inspire a feeling similar to pre-PS2 Final Fantasies, where players had huge overworld maps that made the settings seem authentic and enormous – even if you didn't find a new quest with every step.

MAKING PROGRESS

After staying in Galdin Quay, chapter one is nearly over. We've logged a couple hours of playtime at this point, and it still feels like the game has barely begun. Because the adventure is still building momentum, one thing we didn't experience directly in our hands-on session is how Noctis' abilities evolve and progress over time. Of course, this is a critical part of keeping players invested, and Final Fantasy XV has plenty of avenues to make your power grow.

The first thing to note is that your magic gets stronger. After collecting spells from sources in the world, you can later synthesize them to create more powerful versions, like blizzara. Elemental spells aren't the only type of magic, either. There's a second type tied to the royal ring of Lucis, which Noctis eventually acquires. "The elemental magic is all based on physics and what's happening in the natural world," Tabata says. "The ring magic is magic that's non-natural. Supernatural." Odds are good that this category will encompass some of the traditional non-elemental spells seen in previous entries.

You can also improve your weapons, forging better versions with materials collected in the field and won from battle. However, the main way to increase your effectiveness in combat is by spending ability points, which you accrue as you level up. "The growth system itself is built out of choices, so you can make the decision to grow yourself or grow your party," says lead game designer Kenichiro Yuji. "You consider your choices and make your decisions, and that ultimately relates to the action." Most of the upgrading happens on Noctis directly, though many of the options involve his companions and their performance.

"You're always able to consider how you can potentially grow your party to fit your gameplay style, which kind of adds to that traditional FF strategic element," Tabata says.

Going Platinum

If you can't wait until September to play Final Fantasy XV, you can get a taste of the experience right now with the Platinum Demo. Released as a free download for PS4 and Xbox One after Square Enix's Final Fantasy Uncovered event, this slice of gameplay puts players in control of Noctis as a child, navigating a dreamscape as his physical body recovers from a grave injury.

Unlike the Episode Duscae demo, which featured an area cut out from the main game, the story and content in the Platinum Demo is unique; you won't see it when you play through Final Fantasy XV. However, it has elements that carry over to the full version of the game, and you can learn a surprising amount about what to expect by playing the Platinum Demo.

Weapons

Young Noctis only gets access to silly child-like weapons, but the way they handle corresponds to the weapon categories in the main game. For example, the toy hammer is slow and powerful, like the heavy weapons adult Noctis eventually uses. By being a dedicated collector, you can build up a large arsenal to experiment with. You're also getting a feel for how you can switch your equipped weapons mid-combo using the d-pad in order to adapt to different situations.

Magic

Episode Duscae didn't allow players to use magic, and most of the Platinum Demo technically doesn't, either. However, it has a practically identical function, where Noctis finds objects like fireworks that can be thrown at enemies. That's also how elemental magic works in XV – you use it like an item, and have a limited supply. The targeting process is more like throwing a grenade than traditional magic, so it can be difficult to pull off when you're swarmed, and takes some practice.

Driving

Traveling by car will be your preferred method for traversing the huge world of Final Fantasy XV, and you get a little glimpse into how it feels to be behind the wheel in the demo. The vehicles available at first are pretty clunky, but you can access faster and better-handling options if you're a thorough explorer.

Monsters

Noctis can briefly transform into monsters, like the Sahagin, which provides a fun change of pace in the demo. The team clearly has the technology to put players in control of monsters – we even saw a Behemoth being steered around in a test mode while we were visiting BDz. However, we didn't see anything conclusive about whether that capability would be incorporated into the core experience.

Combat

The final fight of the demo pits players against an Iron Giant – an imposing armored foe with a large sword. This is the purest sample of how the tactical battles of Final Fantasy XV play out; you need to effectively move between your offensive and defensive stances, learn how to counter, and use your warp ability to take down the beast. Since you briefly transform into adult Noctis for this sequence, you also have access to real weapons and magic.

Carbuncle

The familiar creature that accompanies Noctis is usually called Carbuncle, but you get a chance to name the cute monster for yourself at the end of the demo. That's not the end of the story for the furry thing – don't be surprised if it crosses paths with Noctis again in Final Fantasy XV, bearing the name you gave it.

You can spend ability points in a variety of ways, including obtaining new weapon skills, increasing your buddies' capabilities and teaching them new commands, and tapping into new powers. "If you're not very good at defending, you would want to strengthen the auto-dodge ability," Yuji says. "But if you consider yourself a great player, you can choose to grow the abilities where better play is given better rewards. Players can choose which kinds of bonus functions they allocate their points to."

Refining and developing your playstyle and abilities is a process that happens gradually over many hours, so you won't be able to dig too deep in chapter one – especially considering all of the options (like ring magic) aren't available. That's okay, because this chapter is more about introducing players to the world and mechanics; the real story hasn't even started yet, but that changes soon.

Returning to our hands-on session in Galdin Quay, the party is resting up in their motel room when Ignis comes in holding a newspaper bearing grim news. Lucis has been attacked, and the crystal has gone missing. The peace treaty signing with Niflheim was apparently just a ruse to lower Insomnia's defense. Reports indicate that King Regis, Noctis, and Luna were all killed in the attack.

Noctis is horrified, but he knows at least part of the story is wrong – and hopes the rest is, too. He and his friends hop in the car immediately, speeding back in the direction they came to return to Lucis. On the road, giant warships from Niflheim fly above them, heading in the same direction. The situation gets even worse when they reach the border, since the empire has set up a barricade of mechanical soldiers preventing entry into Lucis. After taking a side road, Noctis and his friends fight through a detachment of imperial troops to reach an overlook. It doesn't give them access to the bridge to Lucis, but it lets them see what's happening on the horizon. The sky is dark and full of airships, and smoke is rising from the skyline.

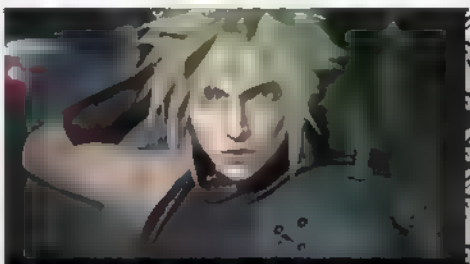
Just then, Noctis gets a phone call from Cor, a royal guard and friend of Regis, bearing bad news about the state of his homeland (the details of which we won't spoil here). On the overlook, Noctis, Gladiolus, Ignis, and Prompto stare out helplessly in the direction of Lucis as the first chapter of Final Fantasy XV concludes.

WHAT LIES BEYOND

The end of chapter one is a turning point in the story. Our playtime may be over, but the story of Noctis continues, and takes even more turns in the chapters to come. Instead of seeking a doomed confrontation with Niflheim in his homeland, Noctis resumes his journey with a renewed focus. Altissia remains the group's next destination, since Noctis hopes that Luna escaped from Lucis in time, and thinks she might look for him there. "She is the presence that supports Noctis in order for him to fulfill his destiny," Tabata says. "But she's also that heroine that you always want to meet, but can't quite reach."

If his father is dead as the rumors suggest, it means Noctis just inherited a kingdom that was violently overthrown by Niflheim – and he has a responsibility to his people and his father to save Lucis from the empire. To do that, and to save the world from the ever-growing night, Noctis needs to enlist the help of the Astrals – ancient beings tied to the primal forces of the world. These summoned creatures will be familiar to many fans, and they play a crucial role in the story. "In order to do something about the devastation being wrought on the world, they need to borrow the power of the summons," Tabata says. "Similar to the elemental magic, how it draws on the planet's resources, the summons also coexist and are linked to the planet. With the crisis, the summons also need to act."

By crouching, you may be able to escape detection long enough to set up a better attack position



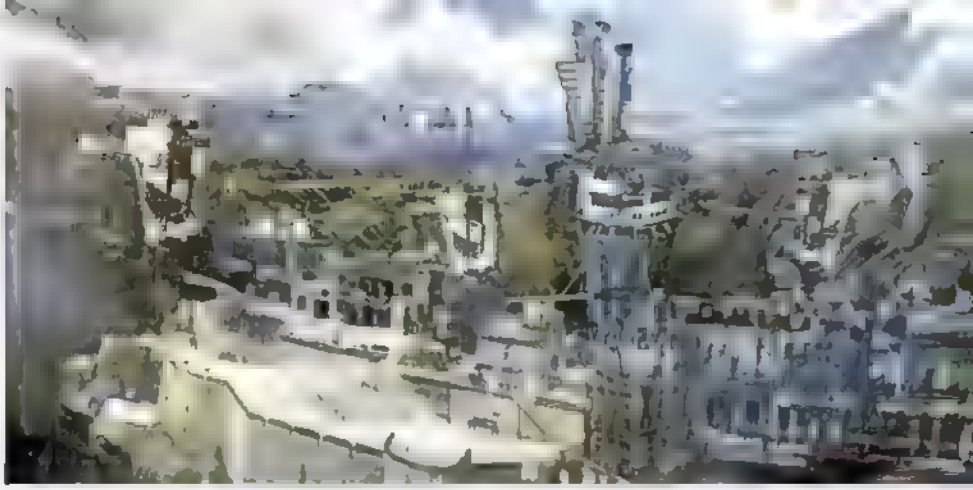
Final Fantasy's Future

Square Enix is currently focused on Final Fantasy XV, and the company hasn't made any announcements regarding Final Fantasy XVI and beyond. However, we already know the next major beat for the franchise: Final Fantasy VII Remake. After Final Fantasy XV, this reimagined epic will be the next core Final Fantasy installment – or rather, installments. When the project was first announced, people were confused by its multi-part nature, but the goal is to structure it more like Final Fantasy XIII than an episodic series.

"It will essentially be a full-scale game for each part of the multi-part series," says producer Yoshinori Kitase. "In XIII, each installment told the story from a different angle. It was kind of like approaching an unknown territory, in a sense. Whereas with Final Fantasy VII Remake, we already have a preexisting story, so it wouldn't really make sense if that isn't encompassed in the multi-part series... So, if we're just looking at each of these parts, one part should be on par with the scale of one Final Fantasy XIII game."

Even though the team is working off a preexisting story, it is also taking liberties with the content – and nothing is off-limits. "I, along with Nomura-san and Nojima-san – who are involved with the remake – were involved with the original Final Fantasy VII," Kitase says. "We were the people who created it, so in that sense, we don't think anything is untouchable. That isn't to say we're changing everything!"

The remake is still early in production, but fans can safely expect a shorter development timeline than the decade-long road Final Fantasy XV has traveled.



The journey to recruit the Astrals takes Noct's all over the world, traveling by car, boat, and train to strange and interesting places. Not only do the various locations look beautiful, but they also have unique cultures and designs. Altissia, for instance, is a subtle mixture of fantasy and reality. It is visually inspired by the city of Venice, so its waterways and buildings have a historical renaissance vibe. On the other hand, the sea that surrounds the city comes from magical waterfalls that appear to pour water from thin air, adding an element of strangeness to an otherwise familiar setting. That's just one example, and players will be surprised by many more as they traverse Final Fantasy XV's enormous map and uncover its secrets.

"The focus is the joy of traveling in an unknown world," Tabata says. "That's where it all originates. The ingredients of an exceptional game is that the game needs to make you want to know more, see more, and continue moving forward. Those are important aspects, and we want this game to do that as well."

This slice of gameplay in chapter one only marks the beginning of a sprawling and intense tale, but we are excited to see how the story, world, and action all unfold from here. If the later hours can deliver on the promises of the early ones, the team's goal of restoring faith in Final Fantasy could be within reach.

THE FINISH LINE

After all these years, the time for fans to get their hands on Final Fantasy XV is finally near. With a firm release date and a beta build tying the gameplay together, the end is in sight. The team recognizes the symbolic importance of releasing this title, and has no desire to draw out or otherwise prolong the conclusion of the story.

"To be clear, we don't have any intention to create sequels or anything out of this," Tabata says. "What we definitely want to do is allow people who purchase the game to enjoy it for an extended period of time. That doesn't necessarily just mean additional content, but other elements that would create an interesting experience."

At this phase, BD2 isn't talking about what those "other elements" might be, for fear of making promises it can't keep. Maybe they take the form of DLC, or free post-release updates. Whatever the case, fans can rest assured the team is focused on delivering an extraordinary stand-alone experience; the team's current priority is making Final Fantasy XV the best it can be. We were extremely impressed by what we played and saw, and that's with months to go before release.

"We know exactly what we need to do to bring it to the finish line," Tabata says. "In terms of the people we're bringing it to, the fans and the gamers, we want them to know more and get to play the actual experience as soon as possible."

Between this project's years of development and the franchise's other installments in the meantime, September 30 is more than just a release date. It will be the point in time that determines the future of one of gaming's longest-running and most iconic series.

If that's a lot pressure, you wouldn't know it by talking to the Final Fantasy XV team. From our time visiting Square Enix and talking with the members of BD2, several sentiments regularly surfaced in conversation. They have a respect for Final Fantasy's legacy, but aren't willing to be weighed down or restricted by it. They recognize the current state of the franchise, and have identified the missteps of previous installments. Lastly, they are united under Tabata's leadership, excited to be working on this project with a new approach and a clear vision.

Thankfully, we only need to wait a little longer to see how that vision comes together.

Learn more about the characters, locations, and art of Final Fantasy XV during our month of exclusive coverage. We also delve into the larger series, including interviews with Final Fantasy VII Remake producer Yoshinori Kitase and artist Yoshitaka Amano. See it all at gameinformer.com/ffxv

The Regalia has all kinds of extra features, like party storage, auto drive, and a radio

THE BANNER SAGA 2

MY JOURNEY WITH THE FIRST SIX HOURS

BY BEN REEVES

Your world is dying. The ancient race of stone creatures known as the Dredge chased you from your home. They decimate every plot of land in their wake as they inch across the country. Most of your family and friends are killed in the chaos. Even your cultural history and traditions are casualties of war. But the Dredge are only the tip of the spear. Something bigger and nastier lurks behind the enemy you know. This unseen force pushed the Dredge from their homes and into yours. Without ever meeting, this foe completely destroyed your way of life. And now it's headed your way.

A Banner Year

In early 2012, Alex Thomas, Arnie Jorgensen and John Watson left stable jobs at BioWare to pursue their dream project: a turn-based strategy game set inside a fantasy Viking world that was inspired by the design sense of Eyvind Earle's 1959 Disney classic *Sleeping Beauty*. Under the name Stoic, these three men convinced more than 20,000 people to buy into their dream through a Kickstarter campaign that raised more than $700,000.

"We got more money from Kickstarter than we ever thought we would, and that automatically meant that our game had to get bigger," says art director and co-founder Arnie Jorgensen. "We were dealing with a much larger game than we initially set out to do, and we were kind of running on a treadmill to catch up with it. We still kind of are, but it's a lot of fun to do, which is why John and I are still doing it."

By early 2014, Stoic realized the first entry in its planned trilogy. The Banner Saga was an epic that asked players to lead a caravan of survivor on a heroic journey for survival. Most critics agreed that it was an excellent tactical RPG with considerable depth, a gorgeous art style, and a stirring fantasy narrative.

Unfortunately, Stoic felt like the game's development had also been an epic battle for survival. After shipping the first game, Alex Thomas – who was the company's creative director and narrative lead – decided he needed to step away from the franchise.

"When we started the company, we had this idea of having a small company, making a small game that was enough to sustain us, and being chill all the time, which is a pretty unrealistic goal, I think," says technical director and co-founder John Watson. "Making The Banner Saga was actually one of the hardest things I think I've ever done, and Alex correctly divined that it would continue to be that way until we finished the trilogy."

Unlike the first Banner Saga, the sequel will be coming to consoles shortly after the PC launch

"Saga one was a brutal, brutal crunch, and I think at the end of that it kind of hit us that it wasn't what we were hoping to sign up for when we left triple-A," Jorgensen adds.

To help fill the gap that Thomas left, Stoic hired Drew McGee as lead writer, another ex-BioWare developer who had helped write The Banner Saga. Thankfully, the team is sticking relatively close to the original outline for the trilogy. And after playing through the game's opening hours, it's safe to say that players won't be able to tell that The Banner Saga 2 has a new writer.

From what I played during the first few chapters, The Banner Saga 2 is full of great character development, delicate caravan management, and a lot of difficult leadership decisions. Then again, the series was built on difficult choices.

The Saga Continues

At the end of the first Banner Saga, players were faced with a tough choice that ultimately reshaped the leadership of their caravan. Depending on your actions, you were left with one of two different leaders. This decision follows you into the second game. One of these possible leaders is a man named Rook, a skilled hunter from a long line of woodsmen who has had to stand up to a lot of hardship. The second possible leader is Alette, a young yet capable female archer whose mother died at a young age. Newcomers get to choose between these two personalities, and the game does a great job bringing new players up to speed on the story, but returning player will have to face the repercussion of many of their choices from the first game.

"If you're playing as Rook, he's just destroyed by grief," Watson says. "People are looking to him for leadership, but he is uninterested and kind of just wants to die. People are expecting him to help, but he doesn't want to help them anymore, and his friends have to fight to recover him from despair. Alette's situation is the opposite, because she has all the skills and abilities to be a leader, and she wants to help, but she gets a lot of static from the patriarchal power structure of this culture, so she has to fight for the leadership role that she knows she needs to take."

Whoever takes charge of your caravan, the whole group ultimately has to band together if they want to survive. Unfortunately, only a few hours into the game, a rift begins to form in the midst my tight-knit clan. A second faction decides that they would be better off if they set off on their own. After a small scuffle among the troops, they do just that.

This faction is helmed by one of the Banner Saga's most memorable characters, a giant varl (a man and animal crossbreed) named Bolverk "Bloodaxe." The leader of a mercenary group called the Ravens, Bolverk is a ruthless berserker whose prone to losing his temper. After this split, the rest of the narrative bounces between your original clan and Bolverk's band of mercenaries.

The New Faces Of The Banner Saga

Ro'Ech

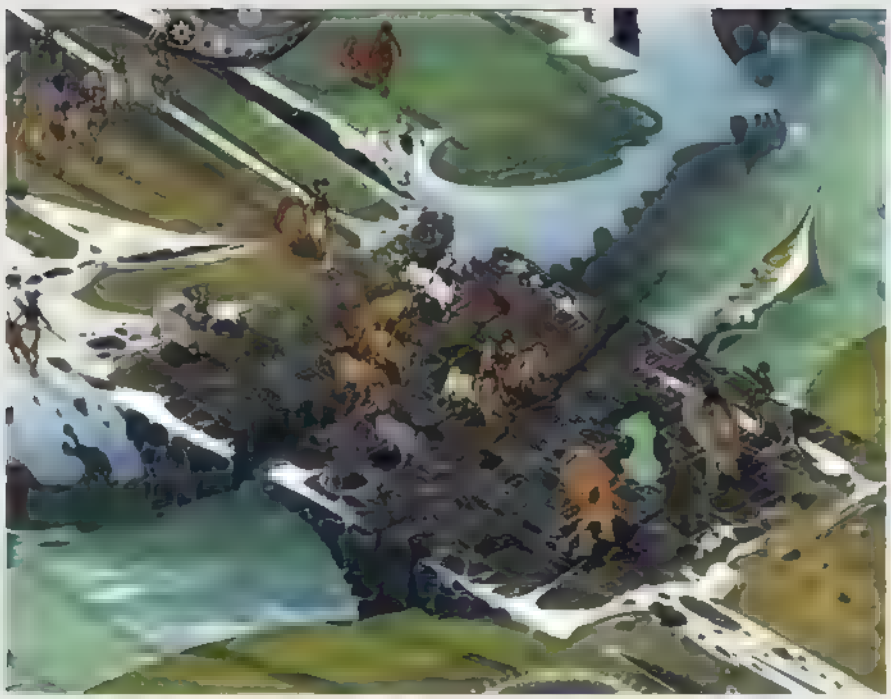
The epitome of a horseborn fighter, Ro'Ech desires immediate action for slights, both actual and perceived. He believes combat keeps him sharp and is the only way to achieve his goal of becoming the leader of a mighty herd. His fear of disappointing his mate, Derdriu, drives him and makes him choose forceful charges into skirmishes rather than well-reasoned strategies.

Derdriu

A seasoned fighter among her herd, Derdriu has chosen to stand behind her mate, Ro'Ech, in his desire for ruling. She is leery of strangers, especially humans and varl, and has spent the least amount of time trying to learn anything about the other races. One of the fastest horseborn in history, she quickly outmaneuvers her foes and uses poisons to slowly end their lives.

Bak

A man not unlike Rook, Bak was an average pig farmer who has found himself thrust into the role of leading a clan of fighters south. He keeps control of his emotions most of the time, but those around him are well aware of his "moments" when the loss of his wife cripples his capacity to see reason. Lofn is the name of his red "pig sticker" spear, and she serves as his advisor in some strange way



"We wanted to – I don't want to say lighten the mood – but we wanted to let players experience the world from a different point of view, one that's not necessarily about trying to be the good guy or save as many people as you can," McGee says. "I think players will really enjoy playing as Bolverk, because it's a very different pace for the game. You don't have to worry so much about whether or not people like you. It's almost to your benefit at times to not worry about that at all. Bolverk is mercenary; he's very selfish, almost evil."

Unlike most turn-based strategy games, combat in The Banner Saga is relatively infrequent. Instead, players spend a good portion of their time managing the politics of their caravan through text-based story moments as certain factions struggle for control and the group faces opposition from all sides. Like the original game, The Banner Saga 2 is a story-heavy experience that involves a lot of reading. Thankfully, that story remains compelling.

At one point, I tried to help a few refugees on the side of the road, only to discover – a few hours later – that they had run off with some of my supplies. Not long after that, I encountered a few men executing a witch. I briefly thought about helping her, but she seemed insane and was too much of a wild card. I know I couldn't trust her in my caravan, so I allowed the soldier to execute her for the safety of the group. The choices in The Banner Saga aren't black-and-white moral decisions; these choices are more about learning to read each character's intentions while planning for the safety of your clan.

"If you put too much power in the writer's hand it will just become a novel," McGee says. "We wanted to have a novel feel, but obviously give players some agency.. We're exploring how far can we stretch from the tale of the human hunter and his daughter into the realm of gods or godlessness. It becomes a much bigger story than 'Can you feed yourself and survive on a day-to-day level?'"

As my two caravans continued their separate journeys across the country, I continue to learn more about the region and its rich history. The world is going through a disastrous transformation. Not only is the country being overrun by Dredge, but the sun has mysteriously stopped moving across the sky, and mountains crumble as a giant serpent burrows tunnels through the ground. The Banner Saga 2 continues to reveal new elements of this gorgeous world and answer a few of the series' big questions just as it introduces us to more of the world's mysteries.

The Best Laid Plans

Much like the first game, combat takes place in a series of tiled, top-down boards, and characters have both armor and strength stats. The strength stat functions as each character's health, but it also dictates the power of each character's attacks. This means that a hero's performance slowly deteriorates when wounded in battle. Near the end of a conflict – after characters have taken a lot of damage – their attacks weaken. Meanwhile, a hero's armor is equal to their defense. If an enemy brushes off attacks, then whittling away their armor makes them more vulnerable to future attacks. This battle system remains highly rewarding and forces players into some interesting strategic situations where both teams of warriors are worn down and struggling to achieve the final kill.

Instead of tinkering with this balanced formula, Stoic instead focused on improving combat in other ways. One of the biggest complaints the team heard after the release of the first game was that players felt like they were fighting the same enemies throughout the entire game.

"We were dinged quite a for fighting the same Dredge over and over again the whole game," McGee says. "So one of the first discussions I remember having with Arnie was that we've got to get new units. We've got to really hit them over the head and really show them off."

Ranking Up

In Banner Saga players could only bring their heroes up to rank five, but now you'll be able to take your heroes all the way up to level 10. Once you max out a character's stats you can sink points into a new set of skills called talents that provide additional bonuses in battle. For example, once you max out a heroe's strength you can select a talent that will increase their chance to perform a critical attack, while maxing out the defensive stat will unlock a talent that increases their chance to avoid an attack on your armor altogether.

Heroes who reach level six also have the option to pick a secondary ability and expand their move set. I gave one of my support characters a move called Forge Ahead, which allowed him to sacrifice his turn in order to move another character up in the attack queue. Meanwhile, one of my heavy hitters learned an area spin attack that churned groups of enemies into smoothies, and one of my archers learned an overwatch skill that let her attack during the enemy's turn. The addition of a second skill will make any team of fighters that much more rounded.

Stoic released The Banner Saga on PC in early 2014, but the team wasn't actually ready to start work on the sequel until well into 2015

It didn't take me long to encounter some of these new beasts on the battlefield. A group of white, hound-like creatures called skulkers slowly sneak onto the battlefield. These creatures aren't hard to kill, but they can turn invisible and disappear from combat, so you never know when they are going to turn back up. In another battle, I encountered a group of human-like bog people who had trained bears to fight alongside them. Not only are bears heavy hitters who take a lot of damage, they resurrect themselves after you knock them down. The Banner Saga 2's list of new enemies adds a lot of visual variety to the board, and even forces you to approach each combat scenario a little differently.

However, one of the biggest additions to combat is the horseborn. These creatures live far to the south and are a self-secluded people who are ashamed of their ancestry. Not only do they play into the story, but you will command a few horseborn in battle. Male and female horseborn function differently (see sidebar), but these speedy warriors use hit-and-run tactics and add damage to their swings by traveling further across the map before striking.

Stoic's list of combat tweaks is fairly extensive. The studio hand-crafted each battle, adding new victory conditions for some encounters. In the last game, a battle only ended once the player had defeated every enemy on the board. This time around, I encountered several battles that asked me to kill a certain unit or accomplish some other task that lined up with the narrative. Additionally, battles are now better integrated with the story, so heroes talk during combat, and some units will leave or enter the action in the middle of fight. A new training ground also lets heroes hone their skills at camp, allowing them to rank up faster.

"I've spent 90 percent of my time adding new features," Watson says. "We have so many new abilities, new classes, scripted battles, you name it. There's all sorts of tech in Banner Saga 2 that wasn't in [the original]. We always said that with The Banner Saga that we bit off as much as we could chew. There was no more we could've possibly have done with the time and manpower we had. We've done that again with The Banner Saga 2. We've bitten off as much as we can possibly chew."

Bringing The Series To A Close

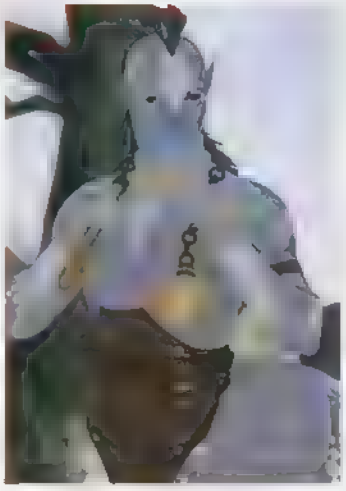
Stoic knows that it isn't making the biggest game of the year, but it is dedicated to making the best game it possibly can. The team has listened carefully to fan feedback and tried to vary its combat while holding true to the rich narrative storytelling that helped the first game develop a cult following.

"It seems to people, from an outside perspective, that it has taken us two years to get to this game," Jorgensen says. "But when you're on a team this small and you lose a third of your company, that's a lot to deal with. There was a lot going on for us as a company these last couple years. We all moved away from the office, and we all live in different parts of the world now, but we're really hoping that we can keep our momentum going rather than have all these setbacks for the third game."

Like the first Banner Saga, the development of the sequel has involved its fair share of stress, but that pain may have been worth it. The Banner Saga 2 builds on everything that made the first game such a delight, from its gorgeous visuals to its deep combat system and novel-worthy narrative. The team is small, but it hopes to leave a big impression on anyone who play its game. \

Like the last game, a good portion of The Banner Saga 2 involves caravan management

Deep Dive Into Horseborn



The Banner Saga 2 introduces an entirely new race called the horseborn. Tribal, warring, and somewhat mysterious, the horseborn have a lifespan that is only half that of humans. These horseborn once lived among men and varl, but centuries ago they slaughtered all of the horses in order to free them from captivity. Now the horseborn feel ashamed of this action and have fled south in self-exile.

The horseborn are designed to roam the battlefield and control their enemies using mobility. Unlike the bulky centaurs of Greek myth, these horse-people are small, surefooted Icelandic ponies crossed with bronze age Celts. They are, therefore, only slightly stronger than a human, and can move about more freely.

Male horseborn are great hit-and-run tacticians who can boost their attack depending on how many squares they've travel beforehand – Stoic's idea of a running head start. They can also move again after an attack to better position themselves for the next turn. Their mule kick knocks enemies back into other units and stuns the enemy in the process.

Meanwhile, female horseborn have a passive ability called free roam that allows them to move two extra tiles for each willpower expended. Their javelins are tipped with poison that deals recurring damage, and they can use their spears to pin enemies in place, allowing them to better control the battlefield.

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

The first and final joyride

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(10-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Naughty Dog

» **Release**
May 10

Naughty Dog has notoriously high standards, and that has been even more evident with the development of Uncharted 4. Drake's next entry was delayed out of 2015, giving the PlayStation 4 a barren holiday. Then it was pushed back an additional five weeks to provide extra resources for key sequences, followed by a final two-week delay for a simultaneous worldwide launch. Uncharted 4 seems to have the increasingly rare luxury of taking all the time it needs, but the finish line is visible, and my hands-on time confirms the game is using its time well.

My demo begins just before the halfway point of Nathan Drake's final adventure. Nathan, Sully, and his brother Sam are in Madagascar trying to uncover the clues of a larger mystery, which we won't know more about until we play the final game. But we do know a volcano is our ultimate destination. Sam complains about a busted GPS, to which Nathan quips, "You know what never loses its signal?" before pulling out a paper map. The three coordinate their destination and jump in a jeep with Nathan behind the wheel.

"It gave us another opportunity to truly open up the world and get that sense of exploration, which Uncharted truly is," co-director Bruce Straley says regarding Nathan's new car. Vehicles have always existed in Uncharted, but never has the player had this much agency over them. "We really want you to get into the spatial problem-solving of climbing and exploring the environment more."

There are no roads in sight, and traversing with the vehicle isn't so much about moving fast as it is about identifying and overcoming obstacles. In the same way Nathan seeks handholds while climbing a wall, I look for dry patches of rock and dirt to use while driving up steep hills, trying with some success to avoid spinning out in the mud.

In the back seat, Sully tells Sam about how the business of buying and selling artifacts has changed with the advent of the Internet and accuses Nathan of wasting money at the car-rental agency by insisting their jeep have a winch. I stop periodically to get out of the car to investigate ruins, and Nathan dynamically pauses the conversation by saying things like, "Hold on, I'll be right back." When I return, the trio picks right back up where they left off with phrases like, "Where were we?" It all sounds and feels natural.

"Those are the little details, the little moments that I have never heard in a game before that really excite me," co-director Neil Druckmann says. "Those conversations should give you greater insight into who these people are, and what those relationships are like."

It doesn't take long before we find a group of mercenaries. From a distance, I can mark enemies to assist with a stealth approach, but I make the rash decision to drive right into camp. I take out two of the enemies with my jeep, but sniper fire forces us out of the vehicle. I quickly get overwhelmed, and a well-placed grenade takes me out. For try number two, I am excited to see all the enemies I marked retain the assigned triangles above their heads.

This time, I drive the jeep to the side, and take a stealthy approach. New to Uncharted 4, an on-screen alert tells me if a marked enemy is starting to see me. I take out the snipers and quietly sneak up on a few guards, but one sees me, leading to a quick and loud skirmish with the final few enemies. The bad guys still absorb a lot of bullets, but headshots seem more fatal, and movement and aiming feels more responsive than previous games.

Alerting an enemy doesn't mean your stealth run has failed. It's possible to hide and try again without a game over.

Back in the jeep, we find a dilapidated bridge leading to our next goal. It collapses, dropping us a few feet to the ground as we drive over it, but thankfully I have a winch to help me pull down the rest of the bridge to create a ramp. Sully back-pedals, saying it's not that he didn't want the winch – it was that he didn't want Nathan to get ripped off. We continue driving and see the volcano, with a small militia around it in the distance. This is where my demo ends.

Nathan has a new vehicle and new abilities like the grappling hook, which lets him swing between platforms. He also has a better handle on his guns, but story and character are still Straley and Druckmann's priorities. "We try to never let ourselves get pigeonholed into a genre or mechanic," Druckmann says, explaining how the existence of a car doesn't mean Nathan must always drive it; it depends on what is happening in the story. In the same vein, he doesn't always need to be running and shooting just because he's good with a gun. Straley and Druckmann are more than happy to slow things down when necessary. "The level of graphic fidelity and details allows for a subtlety we've never had before, so we can pause and rest and let beats sustain by simple expressions on people's faces," Straley says.

Uncharted 4 may have a radically different tone than Straley and Druckmann's The Last of Us, but the duo says many lessons learned from that game have translated into Nathan's pulp action adventure. "We're trying to tell more human stories with our games," Straley explains.

"As focus testers are finally getting to play something close to final, they're laughing and they're commenting on how funny the game is. And there are other moments where people tear up and are crying and getting that sense of letting go, because this is the final adventure for Nathan Drake," Druckmann says. "All those dimensions were important to preserve, all while hitting a very different genre than the previous game we made."

» **Kyle Hilliard**

No Man's Sky

Exploring the galaxy firsthand

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Hello Games

» **Developer**
Hello Games

» **Release**
June 21

The scale of No Man's Sky has been discussed and dissected numerous times. We're excited by the universe the game has placed before us; a quadrillion stars that you can explore seamlessly. But the question of what players can do there has been weighing heavy. My recent conversation with Hello Games' founder Sean Murray, along with an extensive hands-on session, finally provides some answers.

Murray, who also serves as one of the programmers at Hello Games, puts it plainly as he lands on a planet called Bulari V. "It's a deep and challenging game," he says as the UI highlights its current temperature of -163 degrees Celsius. "There is no YouTube video for this planet, there is no FAQ." We're the first people here. No Man's Sky is a game about surviving the great unknown. You can play as an explorer, a scavenger, trader, or focus on combat, but ultimately the game is all these things.

The goal is to try to reach the center of the universe. To do so you will need to build up your technology, including your suit, weapon, and ship. This requires resources. Hello Games created its own periodic chart, and you can find these elements spread across the universe, some rarer than others. If you don't want to search for them, you can trade or battle a space freighter; it's really up to you.

Technologies require different combinations of elements, and your items (gun, ship, suit) define how many upgrades they can hold. The long game is to get better items that can hold more technologies that can help you reach the center of the universe.

In the immediate term, the gameplay loop focuses on staying alive long enough to continue your journey. Remember that -163 degrees Celsius planet? Well, you have a shield technology that slowly falls away as you explore the planet. To recharge it, you need more resources. But there are challenges inherent to finding them, it's not as simple as just picking some alien-looking plant. You probably need a better weapon, and on this planet there are NPCs that you could trade with – if you could speak to them. Finding artifacts out in the world or even just chit-chatting with the various life forms throughout the universe can

teach you their languages and increase your ability to trade or purchase items.

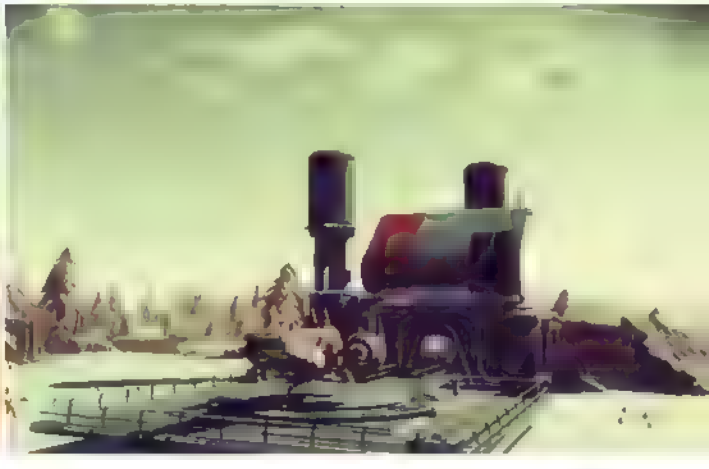
In other cases, you may run across a refinery that has a locked door. You could hack that door with the right technology, but a good old-fashioned gun will blow the entrance wide open. Whenever you attack anything on a planet (or in space for that matter), you raise your wanted level, much like in Grand Theft Auto. If you're on a planet when that happens, it draws the attention of the sentinels, a self-replicating robot army. That means if you blow that door open, you need to get inside, download the plans for a new technology, and then get out of range and off the planet before the sentinels overpower you.

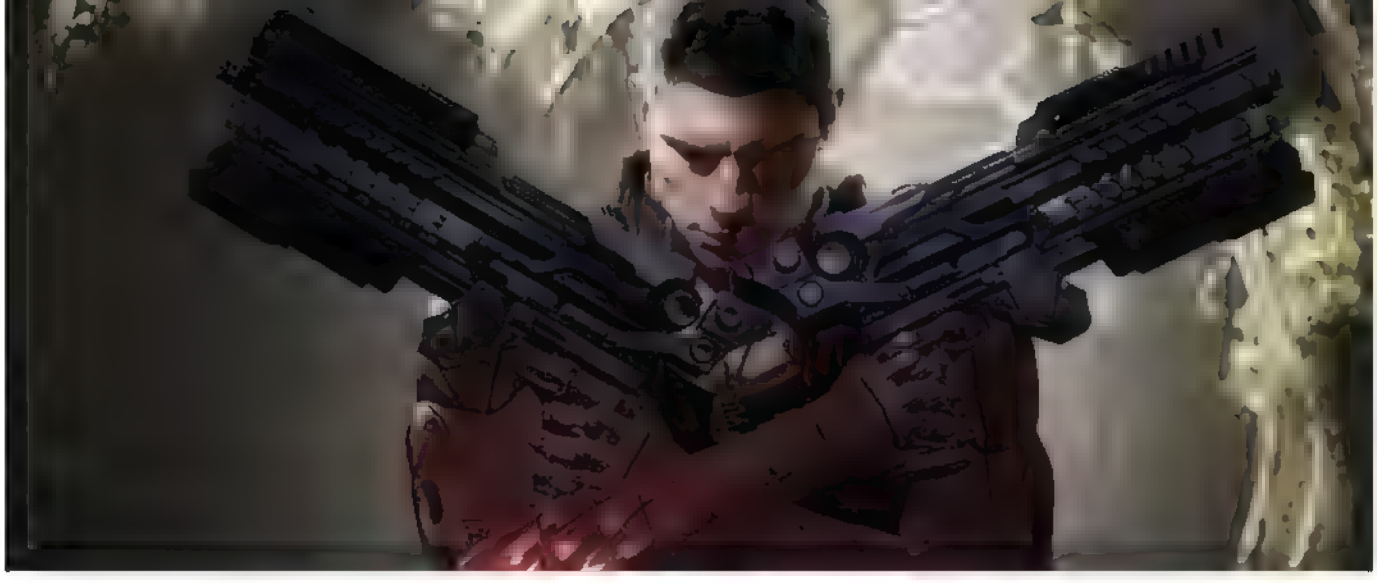
I spent a lot of time wandering the surface of Bulari V, scanning animals and looking for resources. I built a grenade that could deform the world, which can be useful for finding caves, but all I managed to do was dig a hole. I recharged my shield numerous times, once in a bit of a panic; bringing up the item-creation interface doesn't pause the game, which means you may sometimes be racing to complete the job as the cold of the planet tries to kill you. I managed to fight off death in time, and I also found artifacts and learned a lot of alien words, an experience I found oddly engaging.

After some time planetside, I hopped in my space ship and headed into orbit. I could have entered the space station, as they do have interiors. Instead, I decided to rob a space freighter and run to a far-off planet before the vastly more powerful fleet destroyed me. On this new planet I tried to avoid most of the indigenous creatures, but of course, one of them had to come after me; creatures become particularly aggressive at night. I gave into my kill-or-be-killed mentality and shot it, causing a fleet of sentinels to arrive and check out the situation. They didn't attack because I didn't start the fight, but they decided to follow me around for a bit while I explored the planet. Their presence certainly made the decision to blow something up a lot more difficult.

I enjoyed my time with No Man's Sky, but I will admit the controls are a little clumsy (though the team assured me they are still being perfected). I'm not sure how long I will want to explore these beautiful worlds searching and fighting for resources, but in my short time I couldn't look away. I want to reach the center of the universe. I want to see what that vast sea of stars holds. It's now up to Hello Games to find the balance between challenge and resource management so that the gameplay is as engaging as the amazing universe when it ships on June 21.

» **Andy McNamara**





Paragon

A challenger appears

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4 • PC

» **Style**
10-Player MOBA

» **Publisher**
Epic Games

» **Developer**
Epic Games

» **Release**
2016

Paragon marks Epic Games' attempt to enter the free-to-play hero-shooter scene, and our hands-on time suggests that the game might be capable of making a splash in a crowded sea. Epic is best known for crafting some of the most popular shooters in gaming, like Unreal and its Tournament iterations as well as Gears of War. Paragon wears that heritage of dynamic action on its sleeve, with combat that has satisfying feedback as well as simple but enjoyable interlocking gameplay systems.

What's most immediately noticeable about Paragon is just how easy the game is to pick up and learn the basics. The one map I played, Agora, does a great job of teaching the lane-based fundamentals of the genre thanks to its simple but well-designed layout. Though Paragon's rules and objectives are easy to comprehend, the game has enough depth to keep players engaged thanks to its varied character roster.

I started with one of the characters recommended for beginners, Twinblast, and spent a few matches shooting at minions and other enemies from afar with dual pistols, occasionally using grenades and rockets to crowd control and take down towers. I quickly learned that rushing into battle wasn't the best way to go, as Twinblast gets utterly destroyed in close combat. The smartest strategy is to provide support for a tank character, like Steel, peppering their targets with bullets to soften them for the heavy hitters.

For my second character, I chose Gadget, a caster encased in a yellow exosuit. Gadget is fragile and has a weak main attack, but she has an array of useful powers, like a trap that damages enemies with energy damage and several flying bots that deal damage to foes. Like Twinblast, Gadget fills a support role, but you can't play her in the same way, unloading your arsenal on enemies from afar. Instead, you have to be tactical, choosing the best time to deploy your gizmos to help out teammates.

Thanks to the skill variety in the hero roster, there's a lot to learn about which situations each character excels in and what combinations of heroes work best together when it comes to making teams. For example, though Gadget and Twinblast are different kinds of support classes, you wouldn't want two of your precious team slots taken up by them if you're playing a serious, high-stakes match, opting instead for a team that has a variety of classes. Like with MOBAs, pre-game planning in Paragon is just as important as being able to communicate and make fast, smart tactical decisions during matches.

Part of planning includes keeping the card system in mind. During matches, you can give your characters cards that serve as usable items or upgrades. Some of them are standard health potions, others buff your energy-recovery rate, which is invaluable considering that all your special attacks use energy, and others serve as equipment boosts for your heroes. The card dynamic is far more than a superficial tack-on experience; one card could very well mean the difference between victory and defeat in a close match, so it's essential to manage your upgrades with care.

As it stands now, Paragon is an enjoyable hero-shooter that benefits from meaty combat and a strong roster of heroes. The true test is whether or not it can find an audience in a crowded market, but Paragon's intelligent, welcoming design might just make it the game that captures the interests of a growing crowd of players who are curious but intimidated by the genre. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Odin Sphere Leifthrasir

A stunning restoration

Everyone has some games they love, despite obvious shortcomings. One of my favorite Japanese RPGs is 2007's Odin Sphere, a sprawling lyrical fairy tale of transformed princes, battle-tested Valkyries, and forbidden romance, all set within a lush hand-painted world. Unfortunately, it was also a game plagued by slowdown and other technical problems, limited English localization, and a progression system that did too little to support such a lengthy and involved epic. Those problems, along with a limited North American release, made many potential fans miss out on the original. Vanillaware is trying once again to enthuse the gaming world with Leifthrasir, a remake that aims to address nearly every one of those concerns.

Odin Sphere is told in multiple acts, with five separate protagonists that weave in and out of each other's tales. Storytelling and leveling firmly ground the experience in classic Japanese role-playing style, but combat and exploration is handled through sidescrolling action scenes and real-time battles against swarming minions and screen-filling bosses. Much of Odin Sphere's charm lies in its hand-crafted characters and backgrounds, which blend epic fantasy with an unmistakable storybook aesthetic. Soft, painterly edges and immaculate color blending make it easy to halt the action to admire the details, like you would after turning to a great comic book page or while pausing in front of an art gallery piece.

On top of this foundation, Vanillaware has returned to its most celebrated game with an eye towards greater depth and polish. While it's not an entirely new game, my hands-on time with the project feels like a modern experience. Art has been redrawn for 1080p and 60 fps (except on Vita, where the final product runs in 720p). In the sections I played, the slowdown and frame stutter have also been resolved; the only time the action pauses is for stylistic effect during big attacks. On the production side, the localization has also seen a dramatic overhaul, including the rerecording of some of the old voice parts with professional actors, replacing the in-house Atlus acting that once peppered the original.

For most players, the design and gameplay advancements will be the most compelling. Combat has been completely overhauled for increased options and combos. I played the original and revamped versions side-by-side, and the new take offers players much greater control, and with a broader set of moves. The tedium of performing the same actions over and over was a flaw in the original's lengthy playthrough, and the new combat dynamic eases that issue. Each character also has their own dedicated skill tree, offering an entire suite of new moves that can be leveled and acquired through the course of the game. Even the special attacks I encountered in the early hours dramatically affected my playstyle. Stage layouts are also changed, moving toward more active battle engagements and less trekking across open areas. Vanillaware has also added new bosses, which is great news for anyone who recalls the grandeur of the original fights.

Before anyone cries foul, Atlus has reassured me that purists will be able to play a classic mode that retains the mechanics of the original, but I can't say I recommend that approach.

While we have a couple of months to wait until release, my early play session left me encouraged. Leifthrasir embraces all the best aspects of the 2007 release, and the new improvements are a literal checklist of the things fans have most longed after. In the absence of a true sequel, this looks like the next best thing. » **Matt Miller**

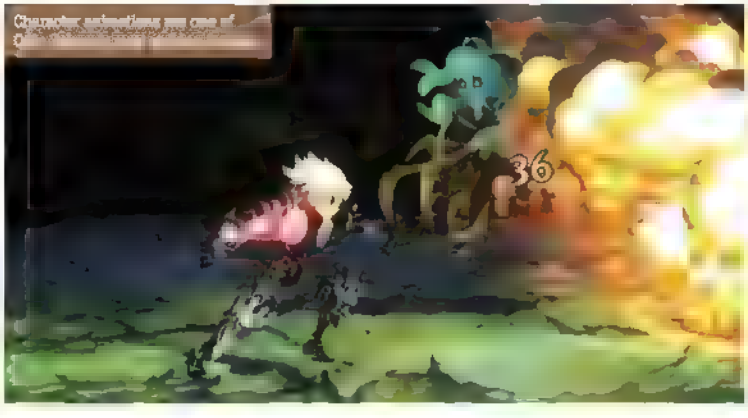
» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
PlayStation 3 • Vita

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Atlus

» **Developer**
Vanillaware

» **Release**
June 7



Necropolis

Delving into an ever-changing dungeon

» [redacted]
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC • Mac

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action

» [redacted]
Bandai Namco
(PS4, Xbox One)
Harebrained Schemes
(PC)

» **Developer**
Harebrained Schemes

» [redacted]
Summer

Harebrained Schemes is best known for its excellent revival of the Shadowrun universe through several recent isometric RPGs. The developer is taking a side trek this year into a different genre, and a few hours of hands-on time proves the addictive potential of the rogue-lite formula.

You're a cloaked warrior descending into the labyrinthine and ever-changing dungeons of a long-lost sorcerer, and your only company are the occasional mutterings and insults of the facility's mad caretaker – an entity called the Brazen Head. The art style is geometric and highly stylized, with deep shadows juxtaposed against the bright colors of your hero and his or her enemies. Music is atmospheric, punctuated by the tortured cries of enemies as they see fresh blood approaching them.

My first several runs at Necropolis' rogue-lite structure are a disaster for my hero. Battles nearly always end in death as I adjust to the speed of combat and the need to create additional healing supplies from the convenient pop-up crafting menu. Death brings me back to the dungeon's opening and a new character, but my subsequent outing is guaranteed to have a different room layout and enemy placement. I finally hit my stride, and begin to make progress in my descent through the twisting halls and vaulted rooms of the Necropolis.

Battles are desperate and harried, often pitting me against a large number of enemies. Learning enemy attack patterns, targeting individual enemies, as well as understanding the speed and swing dynamics of my own weapons, are essential to survival, echoing Dark Souls' combat stylings, one of the game's inspirations. New enemies crop up at regular intervals, often dropping weapons that expand my damage potential. Magic scrolls and potions drop as well, but I rarely know what each one will do before I use it. One drink invigorates me, while another leaves me confused, unable to accurately control my movement direction.

Smart combat awareness stretches beyond careful melee engagement. Different enemy groups will fight each other – a piece of knowledge I use more than once to thin the herd before ever catching enemy attention. At other points, I run foes through spike traps to soften them up, being careful not to take damage myself during the lure.

A hidden ladder in one room leads to a helpful treasure chest. Elsewhere, activating a crystal offers up a bridge to some interesting side encounters. Level design feels haphazard and wild, but in a way it keeps with the themes of madness and danger that the broader game suggests. Even so, it's easy to get lost. Traps, passages hidden in shadow, and lucky loot drops keep me intrigued as I explore. Somewhere on each level, an elevator waits to take me further down, often to a new variation on the visual tileset. In one area, the stark stone dungeon transforms into a boggy swamp, complete with rainfall pouring from high above in the darkness.

Necropolis pushed out from its original launch date, but I'm told the team is on track for a simultaneous delivery on consoles and PC this summer. Along with the solo adventures I tacked, Harebrained Schemes is a so promising four-player online cooperative play to help confront the significant challenges waiting in the deep. Necropolis took a few minutes to wrap my head around. Once I did, I became eager to learn all I could about this enigmatic dungeon.

» **Matt Miller**

I Am Setsuna

What's old is new again

When Square Enix, the developer and publisher behind Final Fantasy as well as several other classic JRPG series, saw that Western independent developers recently started creating successful homages to the JRPGs of the '90s, the company founded Tokyo RPG Factory as a way to tap into that fanbase. The developer's first game, I am Setsuna, seeks to recapture the golden era of JRPGs by channeling the classic Chrono Trigger.

I am Setsuna is about a young woman and the sacrifices she must make to save her people. We weren't given any specifics beyond that before we watched two clips of the game in action, each hardly longer than a teaser trailer, with the text in Japanese. The first shows a colorful open-world map, with a party of chibi characters trotting across it while soothing music plays. The map is pleasant to look at and covered in snow. There isn't much action happening on the map, but it is definitely a solid modern take on the classic world overlay of older JRPGs.

The next video shows the party traversing a snowy forest and battling with penguins and other assorted creatures. The active-battle system looks nearly identical to the system in Chrono Trigger, and even includes zig-zagging combo attacks where characters team up to use their special abilities on enemies. After foes are vanquished, sometimes they drop currency or items. When characters aren't battling, somber piano music plays in the background and character dialogue displays in text, not voice-acted.

I ultimately liked what I saw from the brief clips: The game is pretty and charming, and it knows what elements to take from Chrono Trigger. Director Atsushi Hashimoto wouldn't name any other specific inspirations, but says the game is filled with homages and references to other JRPGs from the era that fans of the genre will recognize. But is nostalgia enough? Hashimoto says he hopes the environment and poignant story can bring in more players than just fans of Chrono Trigger and older Final Fantasy games. He did not say whether or not I am Setsuna will have difficulty modifiers designed to welcome newcomers to the genre, like Bravely Default's random-encounter scale slider.

The short slices of I am Setsuna I saw revealed quite a bit of promise in Tokyo RPG Project's attempt to recapture the glory of the past and bodes well for the full game. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Platforms
PlayStation 4 • PC

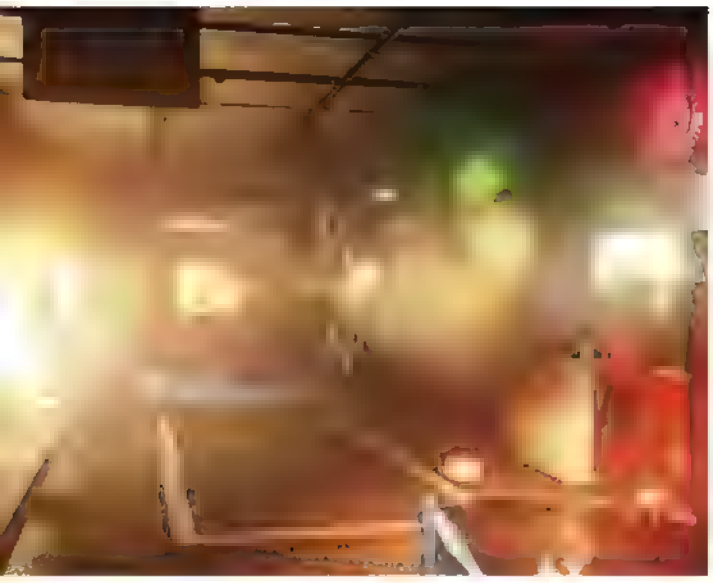
Style
1-Player Role-Playing

Publisher
Square Enix

Developer
Tokyo RPG Factory

Release
Summer

I am Setsuna looks to Chrono Trigger for inspiration.



Dangerous Golf

Destruction with design

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Three Fields Entertainment

» **Developer**
Three Fields Entertainment

» **Release**
June

Dangerous Golf's premise is simple, but it's not brainless. I've played through the game's first 10 boards, and they're already filled with the kinds of moments you'd expect from the creators of Burnout: cathartic destruction, unpredictability, and addictive gameplay.

Any barbarian can smash stuff, but the smart person does so with strategy. Your tee shot must take into account the layout of the room, be cognizant of any bonus score objectives (like hitting certain objects), and tally enough damage to earn a Smashbreaker – the timed shot where you really rack up the points.

During the Smashbreaker you steer the ball (including gas/brake) in slow-mo by moving the camera with the left analog to point the ball where you want it to go. The joy and frustration is that it's going to follow its own physics, careening off into new areas and creating near-misses. Sometimes you want to guide the ball places, other times it's best to let it bounce on its own. Still, you have to be mindful where you go with the Smashbreaker since your final shot is a putt that scores more the longer it travels and breaks stuff on the way.

Dangerous Golf has the right mix of randomness and control to make it fun and spur you to keep up with the leaderboards. As it unfolds new layers are revealed, slowly testing your abilities. One board turns the lights off, with only intermittent lightning flashes revealing the level. Another doesn't show you the hole until after you've earned a certain amount during the Smashbreaker. There's also a timed putting stage where ricochets off the wall can lead to big points.

Developer Three Fields Entertainment says this is only the beginning of what the game has to offer. The more they set it up the more we'll keep knocking it all down.
» **Matthew Kato**

Overland

Survival meets tactics

» **Platform**
PC • Mac

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher**
Finji

» **Developer**
Finji

» **Release**
2016

Survival games have been all the rage in recent years, but my hours exploring the haunting and lonely world of Overland reveal a clever twist on the formula. Using turn-based mechanics, procedurally generated encounters, and a pared back visual aesthetic, developer Finji is carving its own niche.

Each game of Overland begins with the control of a single individual on a tactical grid of a ruined landscape. Right away, things seem out of place. Your randomly assigned character description might read: "Used to make the best fried chicken. Can't handle the lack of electricity," or "Lived a sheltered life. Finds this all fascinating." Play unfolds in turns, as you move between squares, search containers, or manipulate objects. As you explore, the feeling of wrongness is accentuated as you meet your first fellow survivor, whose greeting is curt and suspicious.

Make any noise by dragging around a trash bin or starting an abandoned car, and you get an inkling of what has happened. Monstrous, sound-sensitive creatures dig up from underground and converge on your location. Thrown bottles, lit torches, and other makeshift weapons let you hold them off. It's useless to fight for long, as more arrive in response to the ruckus. Your best bet is to fuel up a vehicle and escape.

In between these randomly generated tactical encounters, you appear on a map exhibiting your gradual escape from the east to the west coast of America. Along the way, sites are marked, one might lead to a fellow survivor, and another to much needed supplies. How much gas will it take to reach your desired location? How risky is each locale?

Overland offers simple mouse-click controls and uncomplicated encounters, but the post-apocalyptic atmosphere and difficult choices facing you are strangely compelling. After several failed adventures that left my team dead, I'm eager to explore the complete journey west when Finji launches the game later this year. » **Matt Miller**

Overland's square grids are confining, and enemies can approach fast, so every move counts!

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Tyranny

Obsidian's new RPG breaks bad

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Paradox Interactive

» **Developer**
Obsidian Entertainment

» **Release**
2016

Have you ever been curious what Judge Dredd might be like in a dark fantasy setting? Obsidian and Paradox Interactive's upcoming RPG, Tyranny, might just be up your alley.

Set in the land of Tiers after a great war, you play an officer in the army of Kyros, the overlord who's brought devastation to the world. According to game director Brian Hines, the concept sprung from a desire to "tell stories based more on human hate and greed than magic," he says. "You're not some farmhand who's given a dagger." In Tyranny, you start from a position of power and constantly make choices that affect the world and the beings that inhabit it, even in the prologue.

The factions and environments are shaped by choices you make in the opening sequence. During the demo, I saw the same area on two different save files, with each file reflecting the drastically different choices made during the opening sequence.

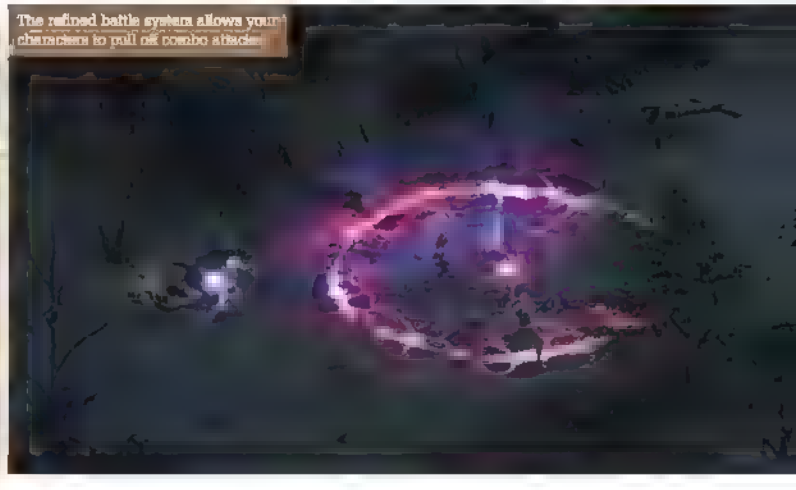
In the first save, the party came across a village on some flatlands where a tribe was threatening to execute a beastman. In another save, the land had been directly affected even more by the player's choices in the opening so the village was on an elevated, ruined surface, though the same scenario with the beastman was still in play, just with different factions.

In Tyranny, you're a Fatebinder, a sort of Inquisitor who wields nearly unlimited authority and can settle tense situations through persuasion or brute force. In the first demo I saw, the Fatebinder told the crowd cheering on the beastman's approaching death that they'd handle the matter and then promptly released the prisoner into the wild. This earned the respect of some soldiers in the village while the villagers, at war with the beastmen, were disgusted and angered. In the other save, the Fatebinder killed the creature and the opposite effect happened, with the villagers approving but the faction of soldiers' relationship with the protagonist taking a hit.

Neither option is "the wrong one." Tyranny is a classless RPG that, according to its creators, is constantly encouraging you to build whatever character you want. The decisions you make have positive and negative effects on your situation and factions no matter what you do, but I was impressed with how authentically different each branching path seemed during the demo, and with the fact that you earn experience points both in dialogue interactions and combat.

The snippet of combat demoed also showcased the standard, enjoyable tactical CRPG mechanics seen in Pillars of Eternity, the last game Obsidian and Paradox worked on, with a few minor enhancements. Characters in your party who grow together become capable of unleashing tandem attacks (kind of like Chrono Trigger's combo attacks). The one we saw in the demo had a character catapulting an allied archer in the air so they could rain arrows down upon the opposition.

I left the demo for Tyranny yearning for more details, impressed with the ambition in both its concept and combat mechanics. Whether or not the final version can live up to that ambition is a sizable order, but we'll find out if Obsidian and Paradox are up to the task in late 2016, when the game is scheduled to release. ▪ **Javy Gwaltney**



Minecraft

The blockbuster hit comes to Oculus Rift

Minecraft is one of the biggest franchises of any entertainment medium, and developer Mojang is tasked with continually improving the experience to keep its avid player base engaged. The wildly popular sandbox game has made the jump from PC to consoles and mobile devices, and now it's making its way to VR. I witnessed firsthand how VR enhances the experience at a recent Microsoft event.

I strap on the Oculus Rift headset and enter a virtual room in the Minecraft universe. A flat screen sits in the middle of it, with a game of Minecraft on the screen. This living-room experience is fine, as I can do everything normally available to Minecraft players, but it's not the real future of Minecraft in VR. Immersive mode offers the most excitement.

I switch to it with a push of a button and am transported to the middle of a pre-built world from Mojang. Using the tracking of the Oculus Rift, I look around the world by turning my head. As my head turns, the HUD follows my view. I can also access my inventory, highlight items by just looking at them, and then move them into my hotbar. The same concept applies to crafting, as I can point my head at the table grid and drop the pieces into the pickaxe recipe.

Once I craft my pickaxe, I continue forward to a dark tunnel, which I make my way through by lining it with torches. As I emerge from the darkened area, I'm greeted by zombies and skeletons. I quickly equip my sword, aim at them by turning my head, and pull the trigger to swing. After eliminating the baddies, I continue along a cobblestone path. I tilt my head up to see a massive structure in the distance. Without hesitation, I push toward it.

I turn the corner and find a cart. I hop in and it shoots me up a steep incline. Looking out over the pixelated vistas in the cart is one of the highlights of my time with the VR build, as I get the feeling of actually moving thanks to the immersive tech. Other highlights include blowing up a target to reveal a giant Enderman statue, shooting at chickens with a bow and arrow, and flooding a lava-filled area to make it safe for traversal.

At long last, I reach the tower that I spotted from the ground earlier. I enter the spire to find that it's just a freefall into a pool full of water. I love freefall experiences in VR, as the tech tricks your brain into thinking that you're actually falling, meaning you feel that mild turning sensation in your stomach as you plunge through the virtual world. I excitedly jump from the ledge into the pool and dive deep into the squid-filled waters.

The head-tracking controls feel more natural than I anticipated – though the swivel chair I was sitting in certainly helped. I've never been a big fan of Minecraft, but the level of immersion that VR can bring might be enough to finally get me to dig deeper into this juggernaut franchise. After all, moments like the cart rides and my dive into the pool stick with me long after my demo. » **Brian Shea**

» Platform
Rift

» Style
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBD)

» Publisher
Microsoft

» Developer
Mojang

» Release
Spring (Beta)

More Immersive Socializing

Oculus founder Palmer Luckey sees Minecraft as a great traditional game to leap to virtual reality. "Minecraft is one of the most popular games out there right now, and it's a very heavily social experience," he says. "Most of the gameplay evolves around building things and existing in this virtual world with other people. Don't get me wrong, single-player is also great, but people spend a lot of time in multiplayer Minecraft, and virtual reality is great because it makes you feel like you're actually in this virtual world with other people as opposed to just watching it happen on the other side of a screen."

Even though it's the same blocky graphics, something about being able to walk right up to these chickens makes it feel more real.

Hand Of Fate 2

Dealing a second hand

PC • Mac

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Defiant Development

» **Developer**
Defiant Development

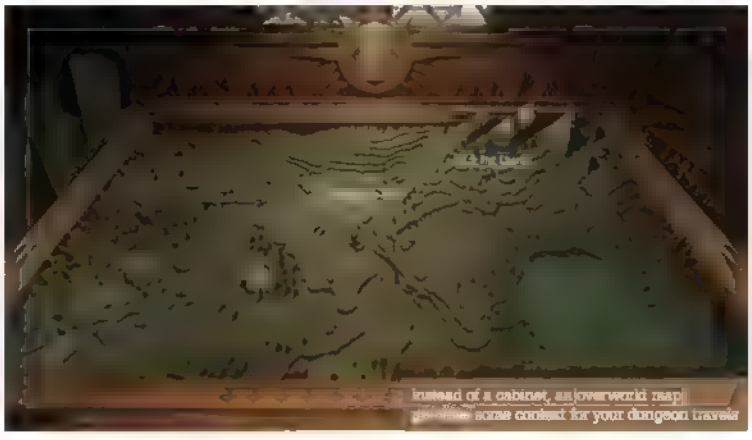
» **Release**
2017

Defiant Development is back with new cards to play in semi-rogue like action RPG Hand of Fate 2. The combat is crisper, the deckbuilding more elaborate, and the semi-random card-flipping dungeons deadlier than ever.

But players have new tools to take solace in, like a much bigger array of weapons, a new system for charged-up abilities, and more deckbuilding tools. Perhaps the coolest new feature is a companion system allowing players to use NPC allies both on and off the battlefield.

The dealer is back in Hand of Fate 2, training the protagonist to defeat the hero of the first game – who after defeating the dealer went on to become a magic-outlawing tyrant. As always, everything is represented by cards, from blighted and corrupted soldiers, knights, and the "ace" mini-bosses popping up around the card-created dungeon maps.

While the first game was a unique experience that played around with the concepts of deckbuilding and action through card-based, choice-laden environments, this second offering features improved graphics and some serious upgrades to the major sticking point of the first title: the combat. This time Defiant made the combat a lot cleaner by linking the special-ability system to weapon attacks. Instead of sitting around waiting for your weapon ability to come online, you're rewarded by chaining combos to power up your special skills.



Instead of a cabinet, an overworld map gives some context for your dungeon travels

Companions are a huge addition to the roster. Once acquired, they can be used immediately and in the missions that follow. Companions provide massive assistance in combat and abilities outside on the board as well. The bard companion we played around with in the demo, Maraclypse, offered magical support in our battles, with ranged attacks and plentiful buffs. Outside battle, Maraclypse allows you to reselect cards during random spins, perhaps turning a failure into success.

Outside of the standard dungeon crawls, players also face significant special challenges and feats to unlock achievements, like delving down 10 levels of a dungeon or collecting 300 pieces of gold in a single run.

Hand of Fate surprised us last year, and we're expecting this follow-up to have a few jokers in the deck as well. We'll see if Defiant can deal another winning hand when it arrives next year. » **Daniel Tack**

Sometimes, chance decides your fate, but there are ways to fix the wheel in your favor

Crowfall

Dynamically different

In a post-World of Warcraft world, many MMORPGs can feel a lot alike – Crowfall is going for something different, embracing dynamic worlds that players can drastically alter through their actions. It's a traditional MMORPG in terms of character development that includes various classes, skill progression, equipment, and crafting. It's also a strategy-centric game on top. Players claim land, build castles, capture resource nodes, build alliances, and lay siege to opposing nations. This isn't a themepark MMORPG with dungeons and raids to ride, but a shifting world where players collide and create the story for themselves.

In this medieval fantasy MMORPG, players start the discovery process on a unique, unexplored map, locking down valuable caches of resources like lumber and ore. This gives way to creating giant nations vying for power that will inevitably lay siege to one another. Though playing as a lone wolf in Crowfall is possible, it's wiser to squad up with a guild, clan, or team.

Some of these mechanics may seem familiar to MMO aficionados who remember the now-ancient Shadowbane, a PvP-centric nation war of shifting power and prestige, but developer ArtCraft is taking that concept and expanding on it in new ways. Once a campaign is won by a victorious nation or team, the world vanishes, but characters can take their gains over to the next "world war." Kingdoms are different than campaigns. Campaigns only exist for a few months — but the "Eternal Kingdoms" are worlds that last forever, and are player-owned and player-managed. These worlds can be enormous, and guilds can customize them with land parcels like mountain ranges, river valleys, and dark forests.

"Since each campaign is different, the rules (and victory conditions) can vary from one campaign to the next," says Crowfall director J. Todd Coleman. "Generally speaking, the goal is to capture cities and hold them as long as possible to generate victory points, and the team that has the most victory points at the end of the campaign wins."

"Every campaign has a set of 'embargo rules,' which dictate how much inventory I can bring in (or take out of) each world," Coleman adds. "Some campaigns allow you to bring in X number of items (or resources) and others force you to come in with nothing (terminator rules!)."

Guilds and characters are persistent, even though campaign worlds are not. "We expect that many guilds will combine their resources to build one or more massive Eternal Kingdoms, which will act as a combined marketplace, base of operations, and social hub for the guild," Coleman says.

Crowfall features a host of monsters to battle that lurk near resource nodes or drop special reagents. While there won't be any traditional PvE dungeons or raids to engage, some monsters will be a challenge even for groups of players to take down.

Like many other MMORPGs today, combat in Crowfall eschews the tried-and-true tab-targeting lock-on system in favor of a more action-oriented approach, with attacks landing in various cones, arcs, or designated areas upon use.

While freeform MMOs that focus on player-to-player interactions, open worlds, resource wars, and total domination have appeared before, Crowfall's ever-changing structure could be just what the style of game needs, as even the big dogs will have to start off on new ground with everyone else instead of establishing an everlasting, unshakable position.

» **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
MMO

» **Publisher**
ArtCraft

» **Developer**
ArtCraft

» **Release**
2016

The world of Crowfall is ever-changing, with servers being won and lost.

There are plenty of dangerous monsters to battle, but the real focus is on other players.

reviews

gamesinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

80 Dark Souls III

From Software's third title in the dark fantasy role-playing franchise delivers astonishing environments, precise combat in a variety of playstyles, larger-than-life bosses, and secrets galore. Discovery and exploration pair with intense encounters that stay with you long after the controller leaves your hands. Dark Souls III is a riveting, unforgettable journey through a meticulously crafted dying world. The challenges and obstacles make the eventual victories that much sweeter.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	The Wash The Dishes game.

AWARDS

gamesinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gamesinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gamesinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gamesinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Dark Souls III

Familiar but fascinating fantasy

9.25

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

gamerfarmer GOLD gamerfarmer GAME OF THE MONTH

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (6-Player Online) Publisher Bandai Namco
Developer From Software Release April 12 Rating M

» **Concept**
Seek out the Lords of Cinder and return them to their thrones to restore flame in a decaying world of ash

» **Graphics**
Beautiful and varied environments, including my personal favorite from the entire franchise (including Bloodborne)

» **Sound**
Intense and orchestral boss tunes, chilling screams, and terrifying enemies crawling, laughing, and clanking shape the world around you

» **Playability**
This is a challenging game compared to many other available titles on the market. Though the difficulty curve begins mildly, be ready for that to change as you progress

» **Entertainment**
An excellent entry in the fantasy series featuring unique environments, bosses, and a massive wealth of secrets and surprises

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

After a divisive second installment in the Souls series, many questions are swirling around Dark Souls III. Will players continue to be surprised as they move through beautiful environments that are as imaginative as they are deadly, or will franchise fatigue set in? Can the massive, grotesque, and intimidating bosses continue to drive fear into the hearts of players and inspire them to overcome seemingly impossible challenges through perseverance and sheer force of will? Can From Software do it again? The answer is yes. From Software and Hidetaka Miyazaki have created yet another masterful and challenging action RPG.

Combat depends greatly on the playstyle you choose. Whether you're playing with a heavy shield designed to take blows or dashing about and rolling, knowing your opponent's abilities and moves is as important as knowing your own. Deliberate, precise attacks and judicious defense are the only way to victory. Failure to abide by these rules, like recklessly charging around as you would in a typical action game, invariably ends in a crushing defeat that sends you back to a bonfire – minus your payload of collected souls. Death remains a valuable learning experience for new players and veterans alike. Dark Souls III introduces weapon arts or skills, and while many weapons share the same abilities, some have unique skills that are a lot of fun to play with. They don't change the core game formula much, but offer a nice new accent of flavor to combat, and are especially interesting with weapon types that didn't get as much love in prior Souls games, like bows.

Hundreds of weapons, armors, accessories, and spells are available, so you have the tools to get the job done regardless of your playstyle. You can be an archer, caster, shielded tank, two-handed brute, dual-wielding mercenary, speedy Bloodborne-style hunter (complete with items tailored to and referencing the archetype), and more. Respecting your stat points is available from one of the NPCs you meet about a quarter through the game, so don't worry too much about making a mistake. This is a great boon if you accidentally mess up a few stat points or completely change your loadout after finding heavy armor or that perfect weapon you always wanted later on in the game.

Keeping your eyes peeled for every possible hidden wall, elevator drop, and NPC questline is great fun. The content is honed by dense in terms of the secrets and shortcuts to be found inside each area, possibly the densest of any Souls title. Discovering something small that leads to something so huge later on feels great, and you become addicted to this meticulous curiosity/reward loop.

Players new to the series will enjoy a rather mild ramp up in difficulty over the first few areas in the game, and multiple paths emerge as things get harder and more complex. The game features some of the hardest and most dramatic bosses in the entire series, though they may be tucked away in secret areas. Unexpectedly, a few gimmick bosses also show up, and you have to put your head to work to defeat them. However, among the superior set-piece boss battles there's an unfortunate undertone of sameness that begins to set in, especially later in the game – too many similar humanoids with swords and juggling techniques.

The world shares some environments, characters, and items from previous games in the series, and while some of it feels like unabashed fan service, there's no shortage of nostalgia-laden thrills for returning fans. If you're new to the series, don't worry – you don't need to know anything from previous titles. You could probably blaze through Dark Souls III as a franchise veteran in 25 hours or so, but you'd be missing quite a bit of content. Expect to be around for 30-40 hours if you plan on discovering many essential secrets, so bring your inquisitive mind to get the most out of the experience.

Dark Souls III successfully replicates the winning formula of the Souls series, a wondrous combination of majestic boss battles, incredible layered environments full of secrets, and precise combat that can make other action RPGs difficult to play once you've mastered the art. If you've never played the series, this is a great place to begin, offering a bit more direction in the early game before opening up. If you've already played the series, you can feel confident that From Software hasn't lost its touch. » Daniel Tack

This review pertains to the PS4 version of Dark Souls III. The game is also available on Xbox One and PC

What About Online?

We were unable to test the multiplayer components on live servers for this review. However, the single-player game remains fantastic, and we can expect that players will be jumping into each other's games after release, both to cooperate and take down bosses or to invade them and dish out some player-vs-player destruction.

The Division

Ubisoft forges a new destiny for online shooters

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Massive Entertainment, Red Storm **Release** March 8 **Rating** M

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Restore order to Manhattan after a viral outbreak wipes out the majority of denizens and dangerous factions make a power play for city control

» Graphics
Fog and snow keep the draw distance to a minimum, but the density of the streets and buildings is impressive

» Sound
Massive forgoes a persistent score in favor of letting the sounds of the street create ambience

» Playability
The third-person shooting mechanics are competent, but expect to fight with the cover mechanics in tight quarters, briefly exposing you to enemy fire when you inadvertently stick to the wrong part of a barrier

» Entertainment
The spongy, fantastical gunplay stands at odds with the Tom Clancy brand, but The Division features some great combat arenas and a well designed loot system that keeps you coming back for better gear

» Replay Value
High

New York City has always been able to take one on the chin and get back up. However, after a designer virus hits the city on Black Friday, deaths spike to unprecedented levels, panicked evacuations begin, and the social fabric that ties the city together rips to the point it becomes a lawless ghost town. Welcome to The Division, where you may be the last hope to restore order to the capital of the world.

The Division setup is classic Tom Clancy: As a covert government agent trained for doomsday scenarios, you must establish a new foothold in the city, discover the origins of the virus, and find out what happened to the previous wave of agents. Story missions introduce the escaped convicts, sanitation union gone rogue, and privatized military contractors vying for control of the city, but thanks to a goofy cast of underdeveloped characters, the narrative isn't as strong as it could be when it ventures away from the backstory about the attack.

Your first task upon arriving in Manhattan is establishing a base of operations. Here you can spend currency on weaponry and gear, and craft new items with blueprints you receive for tackling side activities. As you complete missions for the leaders of each wing, you unlock new abilities, talents, and perks that aid you in combat. Watching the base improve and earning these rewards as you successfully push back against the various factions is one of the strongest hooks in the game.

The story may feel at home in the Clancy universe, but that franchise cohesion is shattered once you enter the gunfights. To enjoy this combat, you need a willful suspension of disbelief. Enemies absorb an absurd number of bullets before they go down, and it can be immersion-shattering to pump a full clip of ammo into a hoodie-wearing thug who's charging you with a baseball bat and still see him tee off on you. I struggled with this dissonance, but came to accept it after the combat introduced more complex tactical scenarios.

Most of the action consists of firing your weapons from behind cover, but each agent also brings unique skills into combat. Turrets, ballistic shields, healing devices, and more add dynamism to the combat. Your options expand even further thanks to the impressive collection of combat arenas in Manhattan, many of which feature an element of verticality. From multilevel sporting stadiums to the United Nations headquarters, your firefights have an array of interesting backdrops.

The majority of missions can be played solo, but The Division is at its best when playing with other people. Massive Entertainment has designed a peerless infrastructure for finding players to join, you can access your friends list directly from the menu and hook up with them in a matter of seconds, or matchmake with strangers from safe houses or at the start of major missions.

The impressive flexibility of this system actively encourages team-ups, which makes it all the more disappointing that it doesn't also take into account the individual levels of the players when determining the enemy composition. Low-level players will rank up in a hurry teaming up with those who have hit the level cap of 30, but their weapons are so underpowered against high-level enemies in the more dangerous neighborhoods that they may not have fun doing so.

The Division's story may be about saving New York City, but in a gaming sense the experience is ultimately defined by loot. As players rank up they gain access to better weaponry and gear, demarcated by the traditional green/blue/purple/gold designations. Players will view some exotic items as must-have status symbols, but you're generally just grinding to get them.

Once the story is completed and you reach the level 30 cap, your options are minimal outside of this loot grind. You can wrap up whatever leftover side missions remain, seek out collectibles, or replay the missions as daily challenges on harder difficulties, which rewards you with better loot drops and a new form of currency you can spend on advanced weaponry. Since The Division lacks a dedicated competitive mode, high-end structured cooperative activities like raids, or level-capped item quests, most endgame time is spent venturing into the dangerous Dark Zone.

Anything can happen during the harrowing experience of extracting your newfound loot from this zone. I strongly advise against playing solo here; you get overwhelmed by A.I. enemies quickly at the higher levels, and if you enter an extraction zone by yourself, other division agents will likely turn their guns on you in hopes of stealing your gear. I'm curious to see how the lawless region evolves as The Division moves forward, but right now it feels more like an experiment with limited options than a fleshed-out experience.

If you can accept its myriad tonal inconsistencies and buy into the bullet-sponge combat, The Division is an intriguing social shooter that taps into the addictiveness of loot grinding in a novel setting. Ubisoft now has a solid foundation for operating its first persistent open world. If Massive and Red Storm make smart additions to the end-game content and keep a steady stream of new activities for players to enjoy, I could see this game going strong years into the future. But if the Dark Zone and PvE environment don't evolve, I'm not sure many people will be left in New York City come the winter.

» Matt Bertz

Quantum Break

Show time

8.5

gamefarmer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Remedy Entertainment **Release** April 5 **Rating** M

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Tell a unique time-travel story through a third-person shooter and a television show

» **Graphics**
Remedy's time-manipulating effects are truly impressive, and the characters look great. However, seeing real-life actors juxtaposed with their in-game counterparts is jarring

» **Sound**
Suspenseful firefights come alive through great sound design, and solid acting work helps bring each character to life

» **Playability**
The gunplay feels precise and your wide array of time powers helps keep the action moving even when time isn't

» **Entertainment**
The show leaves a bit to be desired, but the game is full of breakneck firefights and stunning action set pieces

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Peanut butter and chocolate. Thunder and lightning. Country music and road trips. Some things go really well together. Television and video games aren't two of those things. Only a few developers have experimented with combining the two mediums, but television/game crossovers never feel like more than the sum of their parts. The closest I've ever gotten to an entertaining game/television experience was watching South Park reruns while playing the South Park game. Quantum Break combines these two media in a new way, including a short-run television series in the middle of a third-person shooter. Unsurprisingly, the show does little to elevate Quantum Break as a game, but the action in this time warp is strong enough to stand on its own.

In previous games, developer Remedy has attempted to tell character-focused narratives in the midst of frantic firefights. While I enjoyed Max Payne and Alan Wake, those stories felt ham-fisted and overwrought. In contrast, Quantum Break is Remedy's best script to date. The story of Jack Joyce is a pulpy sci-fi tale about a failed time travel experiment that grants two men the ability to manipulate time, and their subsequent battle to save timespace from complete collapse. Throughout this journey, Remedy explores the "rules of time travel" in an interesting way and hints at a larger world through scattered emails and other pieces of ancillary story content that I was actually interested to read. The cast of established actors like Aidan Gillen and Lance Reddick also help bring depth to each character, and a few plot twists hold genuine emotional weight.

These interesting story moments are surrounded by impressive time-altered shootouts. Early on, you gain a suite of clever time manipulation powers, such as the ability to create a time shield that slows bullets around you, and a time rush move that essentially turns you into the Flash. All of these powers encourage you to jump out of cover and mix it up in the environment. I loved dashing through the world until my enemies lost track of my position, and then getting the drop on them with a blast of time powers before slipping away again. Your time powers are so diverse that each combat encounter can easily play out in a variety of different ways and the cool downs on each power encourage you to use your full suite of powers while recharging fast enough so that you always have at least one ace up your sleeve.

Some of my favorite moments came when the action slowed to a stop. As time breaks down, it creates a series of time stutters, which are essentially pockets of frozen space. I got an almost voyeuristic thrill walking through office buildings, looking at business professionals frozen in mid fight after tripping over a rug or checking their dating profiles in the middle of a meeting. However, as time continues to degrade it creates dangerous situations where objects become out of sync with the rest of the world and start colliding with each other. I practically held my breath while racing under a train that was stuck in a repeating cycle of smashing into a skyscraper, and I felt a rush of vertigo while platforming across a series of frozen road signs suspended in the air after a cargo vessel sideswiped a drawbridge.

It's a good thing that time is so much fun to play with, because Quantum Break's weapons are incredibly generic. There are machineguns with full auto and machineguns with burst fire, but they all feel like interchangeable bullet hoses. The other big disappointment was the final, and only, boss encounter, which is a trial-and-error experience of one-hit-kill attacks that are not significantly telegraphed.

Though it holds its own as a game, you can't talk about Quantum Break without mentioning the accompanying television show. Throughout the game, you're interrupted by four live-action mini dramas that flesh out the happenings within the villainous Monarch Corporation. These episodes feel like the kind of disposable TV dramas that are ubiquitous on low-rated cable networks. The show spends most of its time focusing on characters who don't get much game time, which makes the events feel even less significant, if not meaningless. Even so, because your actions in the game can shape the events of the show, I looked forward to the episodes in an odd way. Unfortunately, your actions usually only result in trivial changes to the show. For example, you might broadcast something over the enemy's radios in the game, and this chatter can be heard during a scene in the show, but these moments have no lasting significance.

Quantum Break isn't a perfect game; it's a bold experiment in how two mediums can tell a larger story, and at times it pays off. It would be foolish for every game to attempt to emulate this form of storytelling, but Quantum Break as a gaming oddity deserves attention. I wish the events of the show were more significant to the main story, but Quantum Break more than makes up for that with some of the best storytelling and gameplay Remedy has ever produced. » Ben Reeves

This review pertains to the Xbox One version of Quantum Break. The game is also available on PC

Hitman – Episode 1

One bullet in the chamber

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** IO Interactive **Release** March 11 **Rating** M

6

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Take a traditional Hitman game and release it in pieces before it's finished

» **Graphics**
The large, detailed environment looks great, but the framerate dips occasionally

» **Sound**
The music is forgettable, and some of the NPC voice work is embarrassingly bad

» **Playability**
The controls improve upon the already stellar mechanics of Hitman Absolution

» **Entertainment**
There's only so much fun you can get out of playing the same level over and over again

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

After a delay out of 2015 and plenty of confusion over its evolving release format, Agent 47 is finally back on the scene. While gaming's premier assassin is more nimble than ever, his latest hit is far from perfect; even with your expectations set to "episodic," Hitman's first content drop doesn't provide enough meat to keep you interested.

To call the new Hitman episodic in the first place is disingenuous; IO Interactive didn't design the game for a serialized format, and it doesn't have the same sense of pacing or self-contained arc that an episodic game should have. Rather, this first instalment feels like a demo for what could turn out to be a very good Hitman game, which IO has decided to start selling before it's done. That decision casts a dark cloud over 47's latest outing.

Episode 1 starts with two prologue missions that take players back to the first time 47 and his longtime handler Diana Burnwood meet. A few short cutscenes reveal that Diana has chosen the emotionless killer to be her agent against her superior's wishes, but 47 must complete two faux assassinations with the odds unfairly stacked against him before he's cleared for duty. This is about the only compelling story element in the episode, and the two levels merely serve as a tutorial to walk you through the mechanics in small environments mostly composed of plywood sets. The levels still include a variety of creative kill options that you can experiment with, but as a whole, they serve as a lackluster introduction to what are usually grandiose, globe-trotting adventures.

Once you've learned the ropes, you tackle the one main level Hitman launches with: a sprawling mansion in Paris that plays home to both a high-society fashion show and a clandestine auction for illegal information taking place behind the scenes. The level is beautifully detailed and massive in size, but this scaling up of the environment causes some problems for Hitman's classic formula; learning the layout of the labyrinthine building and the patterns of enemies takes considerably longer than previous games, as does finding specific items to incorporate into your elegant assassinations.

IO helps counteract this problem with Hitman's new Opportunities, which track the elements needed to achieve the game's myriad signature kills. The system is basically Hitman For Dummies, and even though they go against the spirit of the series, these hints are somewhat of a necessary evil. Not only do they cut down on blindly searching the environment, the signature kills themselves are more convoluted this time around. Pulling off a deviously planned kill is still satisfying, but you must put up with more busywork and trial-and-error than in previous instalments.

Replaying missions has always been a part of Hitman, but given the perplexing new release format, it's now the only part. Episode 1 only contains one actual story mission; once you complete the fairly straightforward double assassination, your only motivation for replaying it is to find more tortuous ways to snuff out your targets. IO tries to supplement the experience with a host of extra challenges, but they all revolve around scouring the environment for items to perform an assassination you've already completed (probably more than a few times).

User-created Contracts are also back, including a dozen or so designed by IO. While these offer the novelty of tracking down a new target in the giant sandbox the developer created, in practice they are just less creative missions with generic targets that offer no story or narration whatsoever. How much fun can you really get from killing a random character in a sea of other NPCs?

Hitman's gameplay mechanics provide a solid foundation for what could perhaps be the best game in the series. However, the new release format assumes every player is the world's biggest Hitman fan, content to endlessly replay the same level while they wait patiently for the developer to finish the next one. IO says the staggered release will give them extra time to polish each subsequent level, but the Paris episode is launching with long load times, occasional framerate dips, some wonky AI behavior, and even a few glitches that crashed me out of the game. This simply isn't enough, even for devoted fans like myself. I'm still optimistic that Hitman will end up being a good game, but you'll likely have to wait for the full bundle in January to play it. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

UFC 2

Earning its place at the top

8.5

gamesfarm SILVER

PS4 • Xbox One

Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports
Developer EA Canada **Release** March 15 **Rating** T

» **Concept**
Build on what EA Sports' first UFC game did well by adding depth to gameplay and modes

» **Graphics**
The fighters are detailed and their strikes look good in full speed and slow motion

» **Sound**
UFC's Joe Rogan and Mike Goldberg provide authentic color commentary, but repeated lines often take you out of the experience

» **Playability**
From the improved HUD to the intuitive ground game, UFC 2 is a vastly more accessible experience

» **Entertainment**
UFC 2 captures the adrenaline rush that is MMA with features like a deeper career and the wild Knockout mode

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

EA Sports' debut game with the UFC license in 2014 was a good first attempt, but problems with the ground game and a barebones infrastructure prevented it from remaining interesting in the long term. With myriad improvements to both the feature set and the core gameplay, UFC 2 takes the series from prospect to contender in just its second entry.

The core gameplay carries over into UFC 2, but refinements improve the experience. A criticism of UFC 1 was how grappling worked, but this game evolved the exchange beyond the poor turn-based structure. Fighters now move independently, resulting in more fluid struggles, with success determined by stamina, fighter stats, and ease of execution.

The HUD tells you what each motion on the stick does during these engagements, making interactions more accessible. As someone who struggled to grasp those areas in the last game, this made things much more approachable.

The mode suite has been given an overhaul as well. Career now includes a risk/reward balance to training where if you train too hard, you increase the likelihood of injury. Random variables can also affect your training, like an irresponsible TV series binge or a more focused coach. While it was annoying to have my fighter act outside of my control, it was enjoyable to see what wildcard elements popped up to affect the upcoming bout.

I love the thrill of creating a character and working up the ranks to challenge the top names in the UFC. Because of the massive roster of over 250 licensed athletes, emerging from the droves of EA-created characters happens earlier, making for a better experience.

Unfortunately, competing for a belt before your career reaches its twilight is difficult. With a meter that forces you into retirement as you accumulate damage over your career, even when I was 18-3, I was still only narrowly able to compete for a belt. Unless you're extremely dominant, your fighter can be forced into retirement before you get into the best parts of the mode.

The other big addition is Ultimate Team, a standard offering in EA Sports' FIFA and Madden series. Unlike those versions, UFC's take has you create a team of five fighters and open packs of cards to upgrade them with moves, attribute boosts, and more. To earn coins, you can fight online against other created fighters or offline against the A.I.

Upgrading fighters is slower in Ultimate Team than in career, but you accumulate currency at a reasonable rate as long as you win and complete the daily objectives. However, the most exciting part of this mode in Madden and FIFA – opening a pack to find your favorite real-world player – is absent since this mode is based on created fighters rather than real stars. Still, opening a pack to find a powerful move to plug a hole in your fighter's game is fun, but unless I want to take my developed fighters online, I'll probably stick with career mode for the long-haul.

For quicker experiences, I enjoyed playing the Live Events and Custom Events modes. Live Events has you choose the winner in real UFC fight cards. I enjoyed testing my fandom of the UFC against others to see how my knowledge stacked up. Custom Events lets you schedule your own night of fights, customizing it down to how many rounds and the referee in charge of each match. It was always fun to stack a card with a ton of big bouts then play through it in one seamless presentation that feels more like I'm watching an event than the single fight structure of other modes.

Fans of the series' exemplary standup game will love the new Knockout mode. Fighters trade blows using a fixed health bar like in a traditional fighting game with no threat of takedowns. Successful strikes drop your health bar, while defensive parries replenish a segment. With more realistic physics that capture the brutality of each knockout, I often caught myself yelling excitedly at the action – as if I was watching a fight at a bar with friends. Exciting moments are common in this mode, which makes it ideal for local play, but it is disappointingly unavailable online.

The online offerings of UFC 2 are fairly standard for a combat sport game, allowing you to fight in quick matches or go for a title in ranked championships by stringing together wins. One good idea introduced is a daily list of featured fighters, which is designed to tempt players away from constantly using the five or six athletes you constantly run into through bonuses to your meter that determine what division you fight in. You can also initiate one-line rivalries, which track stats specific to the rivalry to provide a fun way to establish a long history against your friends.

UFC 2 improves over its predecessor in the ways it needed to. The improved ground game and deeper career mode are the biggest draws, but Knockout mode is a blast to play, and Ultimate Team offers a unique twist on the popular mode from other sports games. If 2014's EA Sports UFC was a promise being made, UFC 2 is its deliverance.

» Brett Shea

Adr1ft

Alone and hanging by a thread

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** 505 Games **Developer** Three One Zero **Release** March 28 **Rating** T

8

PS4 • PC

I'm not a claustrophobic person in real life, but few things in games freak me out more than diving down a water-logged tunnel accompanied by dwindling oxygen supplies and the sound of a heartbeat. It's a reliably tense setup, which is probably why it keeps bobbing to the surface. Considering Adr1ft's deep-space setting, I expected to spend hours clutching uncomfortably at my shirt collar and gasping out of empathy for my oxygen-starved character. Fortunately, there's more to the game than the concept of running on fumes. Three One Zero delivers a quiet game that, interspersed with desperate exploration, offers a sobering examination of responsibility.

Adr1ft picks up immediately after the space station *Northstar IV* has been destroyed, its crew presumed dead. Commander Alex Oshima is nearly cast out into space after the explosion, and she's only barely able to pull herself back into the wreckage. I quickly learn that although she survives the initial blast, keeping her alive is going to be the trick.

Her suit was compromised in the explosion – most noticeably its oxygen and propulsion systems. Every thrust of my jet pack depletes the reserves, which are already ticking down slowly with each of Oshima's breaths. It is an unnerving feeling – then I get my bearings and look around. Survival is dependent on finding canisters of oxygen that float eerily among the zero-gravity carnage, which is initially difficult. Navigating in 3D space can be tricky, and there's definitely a learning curve in Adr1ft. Once I get the hang of feathering the boosters, managing my rotation, and compensating for momentum, I feel like someone who has spent an extended period in space. The sensation is exhilarating, and it makes up for my first clumsy half hour.

Though her situation is dire, it's far from hopeless. Oshima has to find a way back home to Earth by manually restarting various systems that were affected by the station's destruction – easier said than done, since those key areas have been split and scattered in space. There's something exhilarating about a door in a seemingly normal space station opening up into a field of debris, knowing that the path to salvation lies on the other side of a maze of sparking, drifting wreckage. There's no combat to speak of; the danger here is running out of oxygen or getting your suit battered beyond repair from your sloppy flying. Though you uncover information as you progress, the heart of the story is simply getting to safety.

Adr1ft shares the same contemplative pacing of so-called walking simulators, as well as a similar way of sharing a story, but it's definitely more of a gamer's game. As you learn more about the tense relationships between the various crew members before the disaster – and how they cope using drugs, sex, or simply letting go – you also restore your suit's capabilities, which are needed to negotiate some of the trickier puzzles. However, even at its best, the suit's navigation systems could use an upgrade. A simple compass point valiantly tries to nudge you toward your next objective, but it doesn't offer much help in some of the more complicated sections. Exploration is a critical part of the experience, but it gave way to frustration a few times when I didn't have a clear idea of what exactly I was supposed to do, or where.

The game and its inception are inexorably linked, and it deserves a mention. Designer Adam Orth conceived the game after the much-publicized fallout from a series of controversial tweets he made while working at Microsoft. Oshima's plight is more immediate and the stakes are significantly higher, but the parallels aren't easy to ignore. As you listen to audio logs and read messages from the crew, you get a sense that the commander bears a larger responsibility in what happened. Whether Oshima makes it home or not, a larger reckoning awaits – and quite possibly, redemption. » Jeff Cork

» Concept
Recover from a catastrophic accident on a space station and find your way back home

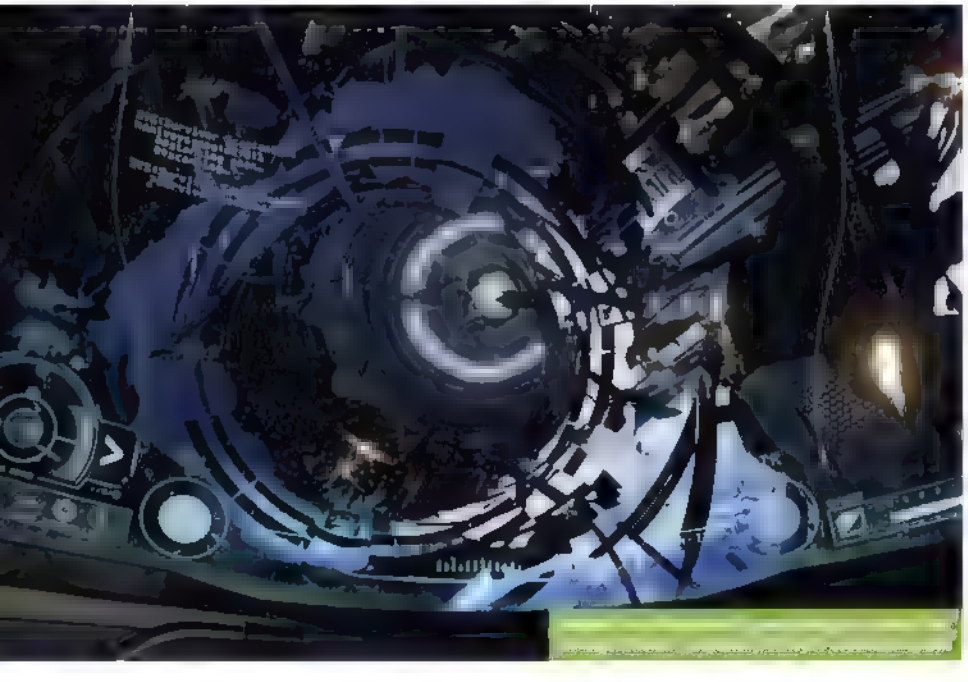
» Graphics
The station itself is the sterile kind of place you might imagine, the visuals shine when you see the torn insulation and exposed wiring beneath

» Sound
Music is used sparingly, but it adds a sense of urgency to the proceedings. The doomed crew comes alive via well-acted audio logs

» Playability
It takes a while to get the hang of propelling yourself with a barely functional suit, but you learn to pull off graceful maneuvers before it's over

» Entertainment
Adr1ft's mix of tense gameplay and mature storytelling stays with you after the mission's end

» Replay Value
Moderately low



Adr1ft On Rift

I played Adr1ft in its entirety on Oculus Rift, and then played some of the game on a traditional display afterward to compare the experiences. While I wouldn't buy one for the experience, Adr1ft on Rift is a powerful showcase for VR technology. Looking down from a spacewalk and seeing the Earth below must be a breathtaking moment, and Three One Zero consistently fills the headset with the closest thing most players will get to see in their lifetimes. Parts of the game pinned me back in my chair with awe, and running out of oxygen made me feel even more desperate in VR.

The traditional display flattens the experience, for better or worse. I didn't have any issues with motion sickness during my five-hour session, which was split into two large chunks. Players who are apprehensive about that can still play the game, and they also have the benefit of seeing the HUD in one place. In VR, you turn your head slightly to the left and right to see your bearing, oxygen levels, and other indicators. It's a great illusion, but I occasionally felt like a twitchy bird moving my head back and forth so often.

If you have the choice, I'd recommend the VR version slightly over the traditional display, but not to the point where anyone should pass up a fascinating experience because one is more immersive.

Stardew Valley

Your new home away from home

8.75

gamesfarmer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Chucklefish **Developer** ConcernedApe **Release** February 26 **Rating** NR

PC

» Concept
Get away from it all by leaving your desk job and moving to a new town where you build up your farm and befriend the locals

» Graphics
Beautiful pixelated graphics create a feast for the eyes

» Sound
Enjoyable, light music helps sell the charm

» Playability
The controls are easy to grasp, but progressing requires an immense amount of patience

» Bottom Line
Stardew Valley is a fantastic game that's much more than its farming simulator sales pitch suggests

» Replay Value
Moderate

In its opening cinematic, Stardew Valley plainly presents the fantasy it wants to sell you. You're a cubicle drone working for a monolithic corporation who opens a letter from your deceased grandfather to find out you've inherited a farm. You move there to find a field of weeds and overgrown trees outside of a little hut as well as a town occupied by colorful personalities. Though Stardew Valley's farming simulation initially appears to be a Harvest Moon imitator, it's much more than that: a sprawling and surprisingly deep RPG filled with secrets waiting to be discovered by the most patient and vigilant players.

Stardew Valley and I did not get off to a great start, but that was largely my fault. I arrived at my farm to find it a cluttered mess and then spent my first two hours cleaning it up. You're not required to do such a thing, but my compulsive personality dictated that I create a wide-open field to plant my crops. Once I ventured beyond my property lines and into the neighboring town to buy some supplies, the action became more enticing.

Stardew Valley can essentially be broken down into three sections: farming, dungeon crawling, and social simulation. However, it is more than the sum of its parts, because all three sections work in harmony with one another to create an experience that's almost always engaging. Though I spent a great deal of time with all three facets, getting to know the locals kept stealing most of my attention.

The townsfolk are a varied bunch. Some of them slowly warm to your presence, others are not sure what to make of you, and a few find you outright disgusting. They all keep to their own daily schedules, requiring you to learn their patterns so you know where they are when you need to purchase items or request services. They're also kind of helpless, so they stick up flyers on the town board asking for assistance with various chores, which take on the form of side quests for you to do. These quests usually dole out material rewards like construction supplies or money upon completion and help you grow closer with the quest-giver. While this might sound like a pain, these distractions are amusing, like finding the mayor's lost pants or fetching a pale ale for a beer-guzzling elderly lady, and are generally worth taking the time to do.

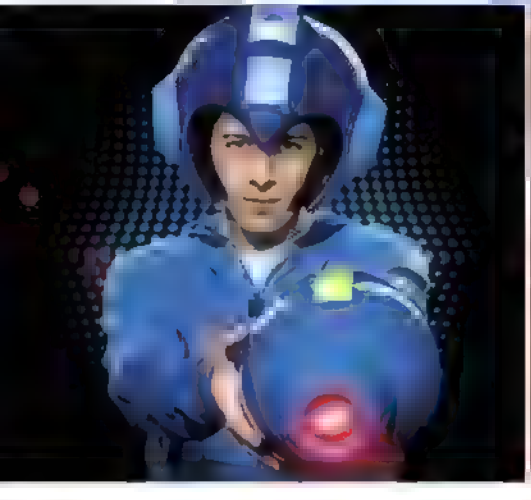
When you're not mingling with (or trying to romance) the locals or buying supplies, you build up your farm by planting crops or raising animals. I enjoyed the farming mechanics as I settled into a routine: I would water my crops and whack the weeds, occasionally visiting my pet chickens to dote on them or dropping off my harvest to sell it. The farm-centered gameplay creates a relaxing loop, one that gradually rewarded me by letting me build a gentle, free-range empire over time. Admittedly, farming got a little dull at times, but that's what the mines are for.

The mines are accessible after a few in-game days, and essentially form a giant dungeon for you to explore for valuable resources needed to build proper farm equipment and earn equipment upgrades. Monsters like green slime beasts and giant mosquitos attack you during your travels, giving you a chance to engage in simple-but-satisfying combat. You click the mouse to swing your weapon at your enemies until they're dead, often exploding in a gratuitous and amusing manner. The mechanics are shallow, but the true danger in the mines comes from stamina depletion instead of enemies, so management of recovery items ends up being more important than combat itself. You have to keep an eye on both your energy meter and health bar, as hitting zero in either results in you waking up on the top floor of the place, with some items and a fair chunk of change missing. The dungeon, from combat to exploration, is pretty one-note, but it also creates and scratches an itch, providing a nice change of pace to the other two sections of the game.

Stardew Valley also has low points. A lack of a fast-travel option is particularly frustrating, as I often found myself walking the same path every day, with travel between town and farm taking a few minutes. The lackluster map system doesn't help matters because it's so hard to read; you have to take time to learn the entire valley's layout by heart. An extremely frustrating fishing minigame also sticks out as one of the weaker and inescapable parts of my experience.

While not necessarily a failing or flaw, the biggest hurdle that Stardew Valley unapologetically constructs is the sheer amount of patience (or time for wiki-diving research) required to progress. Learning recipes takes time, as does figuring out how to acquire materials for whatever you're trying to build. I didn't mind this so much because it felt true to the experience of learning to live off the land, but it certainly doesn't enhance the game or make it more approachable.

As my time with Stardew Valley came to a close, I felt a tinge of sadness. After nearly 25 hours, I was worn out but also deeply appreciative. Turning off the game was almost like leaving a second, smaller home, one filled with fond memories and good people. Though the quirks might unnecessarily keep players at arm's length, those willing to grapple with the more arcane aspects of Stardew Valley are in for a world of delight. » Javy Gwaltney



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PLAYSTATION 3

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Guitar Hero Live	7.5	Dec-15

8 | Clash Royale

Platform iOS, Android
Release March 2 **Rating** 9+

Clash Royale is a fun, fast, and surprisingly strategy-oriented mobile title that successfully combines multiple genres in an extremely satisfying way, but the progression systems that bear over it take the wind out of its genre-mixing sails
– Daniel Tack

8.5 | Dirt Rally

Platform PS4, Xbox One
Release April 5 **Rating** E

The console version adds a series of tutorial videos and fully loaded cars that can ease progression early on, but these don't fundamentally change the game – a game that is the best rally title I've ever played **– Matthew Kato**

7 | Pokkén Tournament

Platform Wii U **Release** March 18 **Rating** E10+

Pokkén does little to inspire hope for the franchise to successfully branch off in new directions, but does offer some depth during its well-paced matches. For those who want more than the small amount of Pokémon action combat seen in Super Smash Bros. over the years, it can be found here. **– Kyle Hilliard**

6 | Hyrule Warriors Legends

Platform 3DS **Release** March 25 **Rating** T

Hyrule Warriors Legends is still a solid action game featuring Zelda characters and worlds, and the added mechanics, levels, and characters for 3DS are fun and worthy additions. Unfortunately, the game's technical performance drags it down significantly. **– Kyle Hilliard**

8 | Fire Emblem Fates: Revelation

Platform 3DS **Release** March 10 **Rating** T

When all is said and done, Revelation winds up feeling like "more Fire Emblem Fates" than its own distinct campaign and is easily the weakest of the three **– Javy Gwaltney**

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Keeping The Torch Burning

How Fire Emblem has captivated gamers for over 25 years

by Kimberley Wallace

Featuring tense battles and fun relationship-building, the Fire Emblem series has been running for over 25 years. Fire Emblem helped popularize the strategy/RPG genre, with grid-based battles that set a foundation for popular franchises like Final Fantasy Tactics, Disgaea, and Tactics Ogre. Today, the series is keeping the struggling genre afloat, while continuing to introduce new ideas and hooks to keep the next generation of gamers entertained. That doesn't mean the series hasn't seen its ups and downs; it fought to gain recognition in North America, and even faced cancelation just a few years ago.

Things are looking much brighter these days after 2013's Fire Emblem Awakening put the series back on the map, and this year's Fire Emblem Fates proved even more successful. In fact, Intelligent Systems is already hard at work on a new entry, which will be the 15th instalment of the series. We reminisced with Intelligent Systems and Nintendo about how Fire Emblem has continued to stand out after all these years.

The Sacred Stones released in 2005, with a new map system to help leveling-up

Building The Fire

Fire Emblem debuted in Japan in 1990 on the NES, defining the basic framework for the genre. The tactical/RPG centered on character placement, putting combatants in advantageous positions depending on their strengths with weapons and magic. For example, the rock-paper-scissors combat had spears stronger than swords, swords stronger than axes, and axes stronger than spears. It wasn't by any means the first strategy/RPG, but Nintendo and Intelligent Systems helped bring tactical gameplay to a wider audience. However, North America wouldn't get a chance to play the series until its seventh entry in 2003, simply called Fire Emblem in the United States. Although it was the first entry Stateside, North American gamers already had some knowledge of the series thanks to Roy and Marth

being in Super Smash Bros. Melee (see sidebar).

Nintendo producer Hitoshi Yamagami actually had the idea of bringing Fire Emblem to North America and approached Intelligent Systems. "Intelligent Systems was worried at first about whether it'd sell or not, but given the series' support in Japan, I felt sure that audiences elsewhere would connect with it as well, and that's how development began," Yamagami says.

Yamagami was right; since then, the wide majority of Fire Emblem games have come to North America, and most were met with critical acclaim. The decision also helped build up a passionate, niche fan base on both sides of the world. "If we had stuck with the Japan market, I don't think we'd have so many people playing it as there are now," Yamagami says.

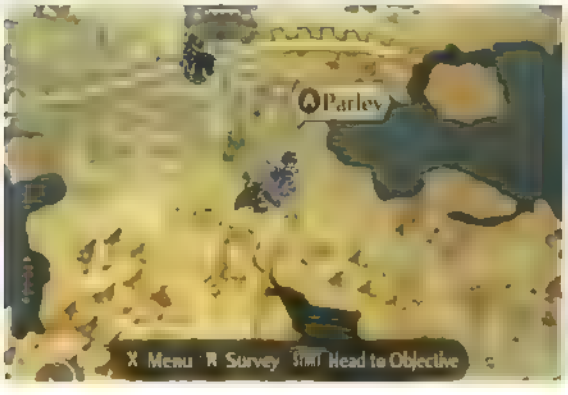
Permadeath And Making Relationships Matter

It's impossible to talk about Fire Emblem without discussing its use of permadeath, where party members killed in battle are gone forever. Fire Emblem was one of the first mainstream RPGs to embrace the punitive, but enticing, mechanic. Permadeath made battles intense; every move mattered, and most importantly, it made combatants feel like more than just pawns on a chessboard. "It looks a bit like you're moving players around in a chess match at first, but in reality, each one of them are human beings, with flesh and blood," says Intelligent Systems director Kouhei Maeda. "As the player, you don't want to lose them. You love them as a real person/character, and you want to make them stronger."

Building a connection with characters is something Intelligent Systems prides itself on, calling the ability to build affinity for characters a theme for the franchise. The support mechanic has been around since 1994's Fire Emblem: Mystery of the Emblem on SNES, and has only grown from there, even allowing characters to marry each other and have children. Support allows you to build affinities between different combatants, enhancing their output when paired on the battlefield. Nintendo and Intelligent Systems are quick to give the relationship systems credit for helping increase the series' popularity, especially in North America. "I think it's because of the focus we've had in recent games on having you develop affinities for the characters," Maeda says. "You choose the characters you like out of a large stable, you've got a lot of freedom to build them the way you like, and each player has their own characters they're fond of."

Awakening A New Fate

While the series has had a steady flow of releases and continued to impress critically, sales began to decline with the last couple of entries, putting Fire Emblem's future into question. In fact, after 2007's Radiant Dawn, Intelligent Systems was told its next mainline entry would be its last, which it confirmed in an Iwata Asks for Fire Emblem Fates. The team decided to put its all into Awakening, knowing the title was poised to be the finale. Intelligent Systems brought back the romance/marriage system, which was last seen in the Super Nintendo's Fire Emblem: Geneaogy of the Holy War.



The Conquest cast is deeply loyal

In Birthright, you must earn your place in your new family

Awakening also made permadeath optional for players and included a casual mode to ease the difficulty barrier for newcomers. "The thrill of losing characters permanently is one of the appeals of the Fire Emblem series, but at the same time, we thought it was a little cruel to tell modern gamers who take time out of their busy lives to build the characters they like to just give up on them if they die," Yamagami says. "That's one important decision that's earned us a lot of support from gamers."

Once again, the developer's smart choices paid off. Awakening currently holds a 92 on Metacritic and became Fire Emblem's best-selling entry in North America, forcing a change of heart in ending the series. Awakening's achievement proved there was still plenty of love for the strategy/RPG genre, and the marriage system was a fun new wrinkle, allowing players access to new combatants as different pairs produced unique children.

Following Awakening's surprising success, Intelligent Systems needed to get started on a new Fire Emblem that it wasn't planning for. Instead of dialing back or providing more of the same, the studio upped the ante by creating two different editions with Fire Emblem Fates: Birthright and Conquest, allowing you to experience the story from two different perspectives. "We wanted players to have that kind of play experience of agonizing over choices even before they buy the game, so that's why we prepared two versions," Yamagami says.

"I think the fun of Fire Emblem lies in the continual line of small choices you're asked to make – where to move characters, which enemy to attack, which people to befriend and make stronger," adds Nintendo director Genki Yokota. "The theme for this game was to have not just those small

choices, but sort of an ultimate choice, like Mr. Yamagami said, for gamers to enjoy. That definitely gave us a lot more drive during development."

The popular marriage system returned, but Fates also introduced My Castle, a place to gather your allies and advance your relationships, take on other players' castles, and beef up your defenses. My Castle became another popular element, and also helped players connect more with the army they were building, bringing some humanity to them with interesting side stories. "Presenting your castle as the place where the characters live out their lives also helps to expand the game world," Yokota says.

Fates has already become an overnight success, selling five times as many copies as Awakening did at launch. Game Informer's own Javy Gwaltney scored both games a respectable 9.25. Most importantly, Fates proved Awakening wasn't just an anomaly; the series still has plenty left in the tank to captivate a modern generation of gamers.

Continuing A Legacy

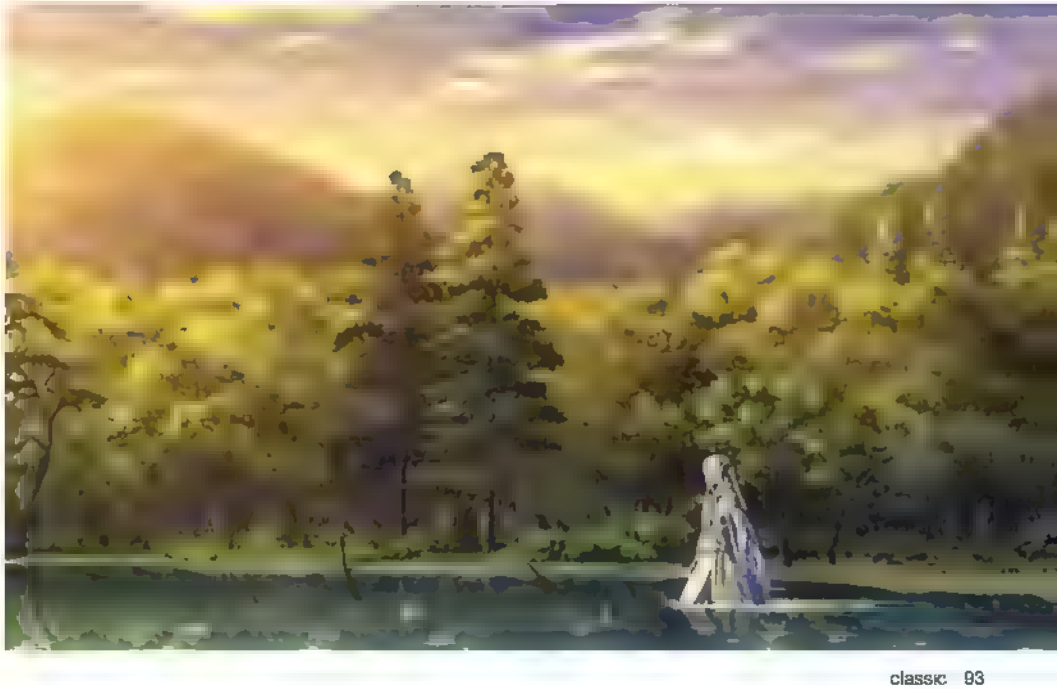
Intelligent Systems confirmed it's working on the next entry, but has yet to reveal any details. The team continues to meet the challenge of introducing tactical RPGs to gamers who didn't grow up with them. "Unfortunately, there may not be a very large new generation of audiences who enjoy strategy games," Maeda admits. "But Fire Emblem's charm doesn't just lie in the strategic gameplay. There are also the characters you can develop affinities for, the way you can have your own persona. gameplay experience We've tried emphasizing that attraction to help break through barriers."

That doesn't mean Fire Emblem is abandoning its classic gameplay or forgetting what made it popular in the first place. "This series will stand firm with its SRPG-genre roots, but we make an effort with each project to keep things fun with new aspects in the gameplay, visuals, and world settings for players to enjoy," says Intelligent Systems Masahiro Higuchi. "We'll be sticking with that direction, and I'm hoping we can keep delivering new things for players to talk about."

Intelligent Systems is also bringing in young developers to inject new lifeblood into the long-running series. Even though the times are changing, the team agrees it always wants their creations to feel like a Fire Emblem game. So don't expect the hard choices, satisfying strategy gameplay, or tragic deaths to stop anytime soon. We wouldn't want it any other way.

The Smash Bros. Connection

North American gamers' first brush with the Fire Emblem series was actually through Smash Bros. The franchise was popular enough in Japan that fan-favorite Fire Emblem characters like Roy and Marth entered the battle in Super Smash Bros. Melee on GameCube. This made North American gamers curious about these new faces. "Smash Bros. is a very famous title, and I think a lot of players first learned about Roy and Marth from Smash Bros., then took an interest in the Fire Emblem series," says Intelligent Systems director Kouhei Maeda. The Smash Bros. roster of Fire Emblem characters has only grown with follow-up entries introducing popular heroes like Ike, Robin, Lucina, and Corrin.



How Well Do You Know Final Fantasy?

Find out how you score in the ultimate Final Fantasy knowledge bowl

1. In which game was Cid a villain?
   - **A.** Final Fantasy IV
   - **B.** Final Fantasy VI
   - **C.** Final Fantasy IX
   - **D.** Final Fantasy XII

2. Who is the final boss of Final Fantasy IV?
   - **A.** Kefka
   - **B.** Zeromus
   - **C.** The Undying
   - **D.** Ultimecia

3. Which is not a Final Fantasy enemy?
   - **A.** Gigas Worm
   - **B.** Cactuar
   - **C.** Demon Wall
   - **D.** Magidrakee

4. Which inventory item is not like the others?
   - **A.** Eye Drops
   - **B.** Hourglass
   - **C.** Echo Screen
   - **D.** Maiden's Kiss

5. What is the name of the military school attended by the main characters in Final Fantasy VIII?
   - **A.** Balamb Garden
   - **B.** Akademeia
   - **C.** Ivalice
   - **D.** Orbonne Monastery

6. Which of the following is not a combat paradigm in Final Fantasy XIII?
   - **A.** Sentinel
   - **B.** Saboteur
   - **C.** Summoner
   - **D.** Synergist

7. How many distinct summon attacks are available in Final Fantasy VII?
   - **A.** 9
   - **B.** 12
   - **C.** 16
   - **D.** 21

8. "O my hero, my beloved, shall we still be made to part, through promises of _____ love yet sing here in my heart?" (Original SNES version)
   - **A.** Annual
   - **B.** Perennial
   - **C.** Magical
   - **D.** Enchanted

9. Name the character from Final Fantasy III.
   - **A.** Sara Altney
   - **B.** Selphie Tilmitt
   - **C.** Bartz Klauser
   - **D.** Kimahri Ronso

10. Which of the following is a card minigame in Final Fantasy IX?
    - **A.** Triple Triad
    - **B.** Tetra Master
    - **C.** Mog House
    - **D.** Blitzball

SCORE
You are Edward. Go back to bard school, dummy!
You are Palom and Porom. You may know some things, but you're still a child.
You are Cid. Not the smartest tool in the shed, but at least you can build an airship.
You are Rydia. You've really grown, haven't you?
You are Tellah. Age has brought you wisdom...
You are Fusoya. You've lived long enough to go! You should probably move to the moon.

Answers: 10 2B 3D 4B 5A 6C 7C 8B 9A 10B

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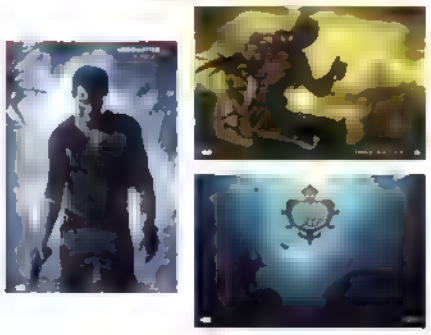

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